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“See it Now”: Television News

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University of Miami Radio and Television Professor Sidney Head issued a harsh warning in a study of local television news in 1950. In a year when television set ownership in the United States would jump from 9 to 23 percent, Head could see lack of advertiser interest stifling television news: “Unless the industry itself can anticipate and forestall this kind of thing, television may end up in a degree of sterility and pussy-footing juvenility that will make the motion pictures and radio seem like dynamic, challenging media of adult communication in comparison.”¹

The potential of television as a news and information medium had been trumpeted for decades before the public started watching. Broadcasting enthusiast Orrin Dunlap echoed a common prediction: “television promises to put the globe in the palm of everyone’s hand, so that the eye may look around the sphere as if it were an orange. Nations shall look in upon nations . . . the world enters the home as an animated panorama.”² But, as with the promise of all new media and technologies, television (and television news) turned out to be more complicated and contested. The potential and reality of the use of news pictures in television news can be best illuminated by concentrating on the “early history,”³ the period in the development of a technology that is critical for understanding its eventual use, a period when patterns of existing technology and media are “reexamined, challenged, and defended.”⁴ Technological limitation is often offered as the villain for the absence of effective television news pictures in the early years, given the cost and complexities of providing live pictures or motion picture film of events in the 1940s and 1950s.⁵ But the stronger constraints on television news in the United States stemmed from the twin shackles of television’s economic model and the print culture that dominated journalism.⁶ In most cases, programs and efforts that effectively used visuals for news and public affairs were freed from at least one of these entanglements by securing a budget beyond what advertisers would pay or entrusting a program to people with visual acumen.

Television’s fate was determined well before the public started watching. Commercial interests in radio beat back any attempts at media reform in the 1920s and 1930s, equating commercial media with democracy itself. Then, those same companies defined television as a logical extension of radio, once again quashing any hope for a different economic model for the medium. Using the basic argument of capitalism, competition for listeners and viewers would result in quality programming, in a much more effective way than by relying on the government or a tax (such as the system used to fund the British Broadcasting Company) to fund news coverage.⁷

The government nevertheless played a major role in broadcasting, mainly because of the limited number of broadcast licenses. The Federal Communication Commission expected radio and television

stations to provide news and public affairs programming in exchange for the profitable broadcast licenses. In general though, the government only considered the amount of news and public affairs programming, not its quality. In theory, competition should reward the higher quality news programs with a larger audience, drawing more advertising money. Decades later, John McManus systematically took apart that idea in his book *Market-Driven Journalism*, positing that, instead of higher quality, television news departments presented “the least expensive mix of content that protects the interests of sponsors and investors while garnering the largest audience advertisers will pay to reach.”⁸

Journalism’s quest for professional status, and newspapers’ response to competition, also hampered the effective use of news pictures. In the first half of the twentieth century, many print journalists and publishers tried to stifle radio competition by insisting that real news was words on paper and not voices in the air. The written word was positioned as fact, while a radio newscast was ephemera. In the area of images, still photography was slowly accepted to a degree in print journalism, but moving pictures were equated with show business. During World War II, print journalists began slowly to acknowledge some radio news people, especially the famous war correspondents including Edward R. Murrow. But in the era before recorded interviews and sounds became standard, the practice, if not writing style, of radio news was quite similar to print journalism, with the written document simply read into a microphone instead of printed on paper. Radio journalists tended to identify with their print brethren and shun those working in television.⁹

Television news emerged with funding issues and few staff members equipped with an understanding of visual communication. As National Broadcasting Company (NBC) television news pioneer Reuven Frank put it simply, television news brought together some “picture people” who understood images, but mostly “word people” who came out of print journalism or radio. “Word people always win,” insisted Frank, “because word people are always in charge.”¹⁰

The visualization of news on television also had to overcome the comparison to the oft-criticized Hollywood newsreels. Journalists and media critics had long complained about these staples of the movie-going experience, kept bland and non-controversial on purpose by the movie studios that believed their audiences did not pay to see depressing news. The newsreel format itself was also constraining, a series of edited films of various events with an unseen announcer adding information and commentary, allowing no room for stories not easily captured on film (Fig. 2.9a).¹¹

One of the most inventive approaches to visualizing the news in early television had little in common with newsreels, mainly because the staff did not have access to timely news film. The Columbia Broadcasting System, CBS, launched a daily news effort at the start of commercial television in 1941 at its New York City station. For the first years, the station had few sponsors and the radio journalists were either covering World War II or not interested in television. So the news was produced and presented by a small group of people with disparate backgrounds, including several with still or moving picture experience.

For the CBS television crew, the lack of resources and oversight sparked creativity. They did not have access to a live remote camera and did not even have a dedicated field cameraperson or reporter. Instead, the staff concentrated on visualizing the news through maps, cartoons, artwork, animated graphics, props, in-studio interviews, and occasional timely news film. Since they had limited staff and resources, they considered their niche as presenting a visual guide to the top stories, providing another way for the audience to learn about important issues. Unlike the newsreels or a radio newscast, the CBS television crew considered each story as a separate communication opportunity. Their work resulted in the television newscast format that survives to this day, with each story considered for its unique visual, and auditory, characteristics (Fig. 2.9a).¹²



Figure 2.9a CBS television newscast on WCBW in New York City 1944. Newsreader Everett Holles reads latest World War II news while camera focuses on map of a battle front. Producer Henry Cassirer stands off camera, using pointer to help viewers follow the action. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

Few members of the early CBS television news staff considered themselves journalists. The person in charge of the CBS television newscast for a few years in the 1940s was documentary filmmaker Leo Hurwitz. Hurwitz had embraced documentary film in the 1930s as a way to communicate the struggles of the working class in the United States, a group ignored in American newsreels because of what he called “rigid censorship” and “malicious distortion.”¹³ While Hurwitz did not push his revolutionary film ideas during his years at CBS television, he certainly did not fit the role of journalism professional. Chester Burger said one of his first assignments at CBS from Hurwitz was to work with a cameraman on a photo essay on a New York subway line. Hurwitz expected Burger to have an understanding of how to communicate a story visually.¹⁴ The CBS news staff did not shy away from topics that were difficult to present as television stories. In fact, Chester Burger’s first job title was “Visualizer,” and it was his responsibility each day to figure out how to visually communicate top stories from around the world. In his resignation letter to the staff in 1946, Hurwitz’s expressed aspiration for CBS television news was not

to match print or radio journalism icons such as the *New York Times*, *LIFE* magazine, or even CBS radio news. Instead, he hoped the newscast would one day be comparable to Roberto Rossellini’s 1945 Italian neo-realism movie, *The Open City*.¹⁵ In the case of CBS television news in the mid-1940s, the lack of resources sparked creativity and the absence of a manager constrained by a print journalism background allowed the staff to explore television’s communication potential (Fig. 2.9b).

The CBS television news crew began to lose its autonomy in the late 1940s when advertisers became interested in the medium and network managers took control of the news effort. The crew had created incredibly complicated visual strategies to cover the news, but CBS at that time would not invest in the film crews necessary to cover national and international stories. At NBC, Camel cigarettes made a major investment in television news by sponsoring the nightly newscast, *The Camel News Caravan*. Camel’s money allowed NBC to set up a network of film crews as well as agreements with newsreels around the world. But by the mid-1950s, NBC began to scale back its operation because the advertising revenue did not match the expenditures.¹⁶



Figure 2.9b 1940s-era CBS television news artwork for story on Chiang Kai-shek during Chinese civil war. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

A handful of local stations in the late 1940s believed in the visual potential of television news. Those stations attempted to recreate the national newsreels in their own communities, using the format of a series of filmed events guided by an unseen narrator. The most impressive local news effort happened in New York City, where the tabloid New York *Daily News* launched a station in 1948. The paper with the masthead slogan “New York’s Picture Newspaper” took the same approach to television, from the call letters, WPIX, to its news investment. The company spent a half-million dollars on news in the first year, more than many stations spent on entire operations. WPIX boasted ten cameramen in New York and Washington, two planes, remote cameras for live shots, and film processing equipment to quickly get images on the air. The station produced two daily newsreels, *The TelePIX Newsreel*, and promised its viewers it would be “First on Scene, First on Screen.” The station is even credited with starting a television cliché when it enticed viewers to stay up for the late news by repeatedly promising “film at eleven.”¹⁷

WPIX was one of the first true local television news efforts in the United States. Advertising dollars alone could not support this highly visualized news effort so the station syndicated its newsreels to other stations for extra money. Only eight months after *TelePIX Newsreel* debuted, WPIX canceled its syndicated effort and laid off twenty-eight of the thirty-seven people working in the newsreel operations, citing a lack of stations willing to pay for the newsreel service.¹⁸

WPIX was the exception in early television news. As the 1950 local news study revealed, 75 percent of the stations did not assign anyone solely to television news, and roughly that same percentage said local coverage was lacking at their station. The cheapest and most popular format included a person sitting behind the desk reading stories into a camera with still photographs supplied by a wire service. Stations also fulfilled their news obligation with syndicated national newsreels. The study made it clear that, by 1950, the key to effective television news was obvious, but not realized: “Pictorialization of news events instantaneously or within a few hours after they occur seems to be the solution to the problem. Because most stations do not consider the value of a good news show worth the cost of production, the programs will continue to suffer.”¹⁹

Given the economic realities, it is not surprising that one of the most honored and respected news programs from the 1950s did not have to worry about budgetary constraints. In 1951, a decade after the start of commercial television in the United States, CBS finally convinced famous radio journalist Edward R. Murrow to move into television, a medium he had often criticized over the previous decade. Along with co-producer Fred Friendly, Murrow created *See It Now*, a weekly television public affairs program based on their radio program, *Hear It Now*.²⁰ Because of Murrow’s stature, *See It Now* had an unlimited budget and little management oversight. The Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) sponsored *See It Now* in the early years, but CBS still had to fund up to “several thousand” dollars each week to supplement the advertiser money.²¹ That one weekly public affairs program regularly spent more money per week than the rest of the CBS television news department.

See It Now also succeeded as a visual news program because Murrow and Friendly had the humility to admit they did not understand pictures. Instead, they turned to veterans from Hearst’s *News of the Day* newsreel operation to film and edit their stories. In addition, they hired a documentary veteran, Palmer Williams, for guidance on how to visualize their stories. Bringing together experienced media professionals from all of the main formats of the era and eliminating budget constraints, Murrow’s *See It Now* program was able to experiment with new ways to visualize the news, including heavy use of live cameras, filmed interviews, and sound and image sequences from around the world.

Murrow and Friendly insisted their crews record synchronous sound on all of their filmed stories, which forced the staff to drag the mostly immobile 35mm cameras and audio equipment around the

world, including to the mountains of Korea. The *See It Now* insistence on on-location sound instead of music or sound effects came years before the lighter, more mobile camera equipment ushered in the direct cinema movement. The newsreel and documentary film veterans contributed the idea of pictorial continuity, a style perfected by the Hollywood studios for fiction films, which included shooting stories in a series of individual shots that could be edited together to tell a visual story. Pictorial continuity worked well for the “people” and “little picture” stories that Murrow and Friendly preferred, especially when covering war. But this style of reporting was expensive. For one hour-long holiday program, *See It Now* sent 15 people to cover Christmas with the American troops during the Korean War.²²

Only six months into *See It Now*, Murrow realized the advertiser-funded model would not provide quality television news: “To assume that the total sum expended should be precisely what sponsors are willing to pay is not sound operation. The broadcasters who will obtain circulation with their television news programs will be those who are willing to invest over and above the income derived from sponsors.”²³

Journalism’s distrust of visuals, as well as the advertiser-funded model of news, continued to have a heavy influence on television news well past the medium’s “early history.” As late as 1963, when more than nine out of ten American homes had a television and the public had already pushed aside newspapers for television as their most popular format for news, NBC’s Reuven Frank, who ran *The Huntley Brinkley Report*, wrote a memo, which became known as “the bible” and was a touchstone for a generation of television journalists, explaining how television was best as a transmitter of experience by taking the viewer to the scene of the important stories.²⁴

Later that year, television transmitted an experience so traumatic and cathartic in the United States that even those who had dismissed the medium had to admit its influence. In November 1963, American television reported on the assassination and funeral of President John F. Kennedy. For four days, the networks canceled commercials and regular programming, presenting hours of live pictures, film, still photographs, interviews, dramatic readings, and religious services. People watching NBC that Sunday saw the first live televised murder, as Jack Ruby shot Kennedy murder suspect Lee Harvey Oswald. Ninety-three percent of the people who owned televisions watched the coverage, more than half for over 13 hours straight.²⁵ Government pressure and network television profitability reached their peaks in the 1960s and 1970s, but deregulation and competition resulted in cutbacks in network television news budgets in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In general, local television news suffered from limited resources until stations, prompted by audience research and news consultants, realized their viewers were ready to watch, and advertisers were ready to pay for, a hyper-local news effort with heavy use of live coverage and filmed reports. By the 1970s, newscasts became the most popular and profitable local programs on television, prompting stations to expand and add to their news programming.

Meanwhile on the national level, as the government reduced the pressure for news programming and the three main networks merged into larger corporations, network news divisions had their budgets slashed, a reduction that continues to this day. Technological limitations of the early years turned into expanded opportunities as satellites allowed for world-wide live coverage, cable expansion encouraged niche news channels, and the progression through videotape, online, digital, and mobile technology has democratized the capturing of news images.

The cutbacks at American network news, especially in the costly areas of international coverage, contrasted sharply with countries that had chosen a different funding model for television (and radio) news. Taxpayer funded services, including the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) in Great Britain and the ARD and ZDF networks in Germany, and more recently *Al Jazeera*, funded by the Qatari government, have been able to retain or build on their national and international coverage.

As journalism in the twenty-first century, in both pictures and words, struggles with major funding issues across all platforms, McManus's market-driven journalism model becomes even more prescient: "advertising's 'subsidy' makes a definition of quality based on popularity more profitable than one based on less widely shared professional or craft standards."²⁶ As Edward R. Murrow warned back in 1951, "[i]t would be unfortunate if television's swaddling clothes turned into a dollar-lined strait-jacket."²⁷

Notes

- 1 Sidney Head, Foreword to "News on Television" by Ralph A. Renick, Miami, FL, May 1950, 2, Pamphlet 3637, Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland, College Park, MD (P-LAB).
- 2 Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr., *Understanding Television: What It Is and How It Works* (New York: Greenburg, 1948): 8.
- 3 Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 4.
- 4 Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 4.
- 5 Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2nd rev. edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Edward Bliss, Jr., *Now the News: The Story of Broadcast Journalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- 6 The United States had the most advanced television news efforts in the 1940s and 1950s because World War II slowed down or stopped television experimentation and programming in Europe and the Soviet Union. Mike Conway, *The Origins of Television News in America: The Visualizers of CBS in the 1940s* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).
- 7 Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, & Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928–1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- 8 John H. McManus, *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware?* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994): 85. Italics in original.
- 9 Gwenyth L. Jackaway, *Media At War: Radio's Challenge to the Newspapers, 1924–1939* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995); Michael Stamm, *Sound Business: Newspapers, Radio, and the Politics of New Media* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Stanley Cloud and Lynne Olson, *The Murrow Boys: Pioneers on the Front Lines of Broadcast Journalism* (Boston: Mariner, 1996); Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone, *The Form of News: A History* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).
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- 11 Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel 1911–1967* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972); Gilbert Seldes, "The Unreal Newsreel," *Today*, 13 April 1935: 6–7, 18; Joseph E. J. Clark, "'Canned History': American Newsreels and the Commodification of Reality, 1927–1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, 2011) and this volume.
- 12 Conway, *The Origins of Television News in America: The Visualizers of CBS in the 1940s* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).
- 13 Leo Hurwitz, "The Revolutionary Film—Next Step," *New Theatre*, May 1934: 14–15.
- 14 Chester Burger, interview with author, 11 August 2003, New York City, videotape recording, (BCAH).
- 15 Leo Hurwitz to CBS News staff, CBS Memo, 3 August 1946, Chester Burger Papers, Box 3E20 #2, (BCAH).
- 16 Conway, *The Origins of Television News in America: The Visualizers of CBS in the 1940s* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

- 17 Craig Allen, *News is People: The Rise of Local TV News and the Fall of News from New York* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 2001); “WPIX Newsreels,” *Broadcasting*, 24 May 1947: 39.
- 18 Allen, *News is People*; “WPIX Drops Film Syndicate,” *Broadcasting*, 7 February 1949: 86.
- 19 Renick, *News on Television*, Ralph A. Renick, Miami, FL, May 1950, 2, Pamphlet 3637, Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland, College Park, MD (P-LAB) 4.
- 20 Ralph Engelman, *Friendlyvision: Fred Friendly & the Rise and Fall of Television Journalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); A. M. Sperber, *Murrow: his Life and Times* (New York: Freundlich, 1986).
- 21 Val Adams, “Ed Murrow Offers Case for TV News,” *New York Times*, 4 May 1952: X11.
- 22 Mike Conway, “Murrow and Friendly’s Multimedia Maturation: How Two Non-Visual Communicators Created a Groundbreaking Television Program,” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Educators in Journalism & Mass Communication, Washington, DC, August 2013; Edward R. Murrow & Fred W. Friendly, *See it Now* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955).
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- 27 Val Adams, “Ed Murrow Offers Case for TV News,” *New York Times*, 4 May 1952: X11.