

The Grand Illusion

by Robert Fulford

There is something slightly inhuman and robotic about the reporters 1
who deliver the news to us on television. As a class they do not repre-
sent humanity. TV news people are never ugly. They are never old and
seldom middle-aged. They are rarely overweight or bald and they do
not wear striking or ungainly clothing. They are never unhappy or ill
at ease. They are, without exception, middle class: no national TV
reporter speaks with a regional or working-class accent, or for that matter
a Rosedale honk or a Westmount whine. Whatever eccentricities they
may have are suppressed. They are chosen not to reflect the audience
but to reflect the way producers believe — perhaps with good reason
— that we want to see our society represented. They appear to be pick-
ed as carefully as actors in a play — except that directors of plays often
look for striking or anomalous characteristics and TV news producers
never do.

The script for television news varies only slightly from performance 2
to performance and from actor to actor. As interviewers, TV reporters
ask roughly the same questions of successful politicians and grief-stricken
widows (“How do you feel?”). When they address the audience they
maintain an even, cool tone and a direct, noncommittal gaze. They are
affable but never effusive. Their intonation betrays neither delight nor
anger. They are surprised by nothing. They are apparently never ex-
cited. Someone being interviewed may shout or burst into tears — that
makes “good television” — but the reporter will remain calm. In general
TV reporters take their subjects, particularly politicians, less seriously
than the subjects take themselves. Often they speak of the people they
cover with a certain easy disdain. Sometimes, as with Peter Trueman

of Global or Roger Mudd of NBC, this reflects the cynicism of long experience; sometimes it appears to be nothing more than a mannerism picked up from other reporters, an attitudinal twitch.

3 The standard TV news item begins brightly, perhaps a bit urgently: the reporter has something important to tell us. Then, in ninety seconds or less, the material is packaged and put in its place and the item ends tidily — always in the same way. Covering a routine fire or the most terrifying hostage-taking, the reporter never fails to conclude with the same earnest glance into the camera, the same dying fall (“Mike Duffy, CBC News, Ottawa”). The reporter is saying: no matter what happens, we are in control.

4 Long ago Marshall McLuhan argued that the facts and ideas we absorb through a medium of communication matter less than the nature of the medium itself. What counts is the form, because the form will determine how we see the world. If we read two or three newspapers a day, then the newspapers — whether we like it or not - shape our way of thinking; if we are confirmed magazine readers, then our minds are influenced by the specific approach of magazines to their subjects. In McLuhan’s famous phrase, the medium is the message. Not all of us, of course, read either newspapers or magazines, but nearly all of us watch the news on television and some of us see TV news three or four times a day. Arguably, the TV newscast is the most influential form of mass communication. In Canada it may be even more influential than in the United States, because Canadians have about twice as much news to watch as Americans — we can see theirs as well as ours — and this summer a viewer in Vancouver or Montreal may be equally sophisticated about the Democratic primaries and the Liberal leadership campaign. In Canada, TV news provides one set of facts (American) overlaid on another (Canadian). Perhaps in no other country is so much TV news available, and so much consumed. But when we watch TV news, what do we experience? Aside from the facts themselves, and the occasional idea or overt opinion, what message does television news deliver to us? What attitude does it pass on?

5 One obvious fact about TV reporters is that they convey information much more skilfully than newspaper reporters. The daily newspaper is centuries old, but newspaper reporters — as opposed to editorial writers, columnists, and feature writers — have still not worked out an adequate and convincing way to present data. In the nineteenth century, newspapers developed the “inverted pyramid” news story, in which the crucial facts appear in the heading and the first paragraph. The

material grows less and less consequential until, in the last few paragraphs, when many readers have stopped reading, the least interesting facts are finally dropped in.

6 That form was set in the early years of the telegraph system, so that if a message were interrupted in the middle the essential facts would still be conveyed. It was maintained through the days when newspapers published many editions; inverted-pyramid news stories could be changed several times through the day and could be hastily cut from the bottom up without the loss of the most essential details. In recent decades newspapers have eliminated many of their editions and there’s now much more time to prepare a news page; but such is the atavism of newspaper editors that the inverted pyramid has persisted and still dominates most news pages. It remains, as it was in the beginning, a clumsy and unsatisfactory form of communication. It makes daily newspapers much more boring than they need to be.

7 By contrast, the TV news report — no more than about three decades old — is a work of art. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Its practitioners appear to know instinctively that they must present a thesis, allow for an antithesis, then make a stab at a synthesis. The result is a structured and carefully crafted little drama, without unexplained facts or unanswered questions. Television news stories are much more persuasive than their newspaper equivalents because they appear to make good sense and the reporters appear to be completely in control of their material. The style of TV reporting makes us believe that the whole story has been told, whereas the style of newspaper reporting - with its loose ends and incomplete thoughts — makes us believe we are receiving only a partial account. The effect is partly subconscious but no less real for that.

8 In structure, TV news stories are closer to the reports in *Time* magazine than to newspaper stories. TV news stories also borrow from commercials: they have some of the same urgency and pacing. In fact, the news people and the producers of commercials appear to learn from each other. In the most professional TV news operations, each report is polished to the point of apparent perfection. Even when an item must be drastically cut — for instance, when items from *The National* are trimmed to fit into the news roundup at 11 p.m. — the style persists. In their most truncated state, TV news stories retain their format; only the most careful viewer will notice the seams.

9 The superiority of TV news is, of course, purely aesthetic. Newspapers are much more useful. The people who put them out are more

knowledgeable than TV reporters, spend more time on research, and earn more respect from the people they write about. TV gets on the air with the news faster than newspapers and displays it more convincingly; but, paradoxically, newspaper editors make society's decisions about what is important. In the United States *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, rather than ABC or CBS, decide which public officials must be pilloried, which issue must be pursued; in Canada *The Globe and Mail* fills a similar office.

10 After watching the media for some years from his perch in the prime minister's office, Jim Coultts declared that "Print in Canada still sets the basic day-to-day news and public-affairs agenda for the electronic media — and not the other way around. How often in Ottawa you see the circle operate. A story begins at *The Globe and Mail*. It goes out overnight on the Canadian Press wire, hits radio and television by morning, and re-appears as a question in the House of Commons at two p.m. It goes from there via television cameras to the local and national prime time evening TV news - while the *Globe* and other print media are already launching Round II."

11 Newspapers of course provide far more information than TV, and readers use that information more selectively. Each of us functions privately as an editor. We re-edit the newspaper by passing over stories or whole sections we don't want to read and concentrating on those items that matter to us. Increasingly, newspapers are edited for specialists — those who urgently need many facts on certain subjects. The *Montreal Gazette*, for example, will include far more about local politics than any television station would consider worth carrying; presumably there are people who need to know the details of local government and the *Gazette* may be valuable to them for that alone. Sometimes a newspaper story — on a zoning issue, for example, or a long-running royal commission — will be comprehensible only to those who have followed previous stories.

12 On television everything must be understood by everyone, even those who have not seen previous broadcasts. In a sense TV is the most democratic of media because it assumes that we can all understand whatever subject it decides to cover and implies that those subjects it doesn't cover aren't worth worrying about. It involves all of us in the ritual of finding form and order in disparate and otherwise baffling facts. The central myth of TV news is the breathtakingly audacious idea that *everything* can be understood.

13 Television reporters don't get above themselves, don't exceed their

authority. They never claim superior knowledge — in fact, they don't even hint that they know anything except the facts they are delivering. They are aware, and perhaps the audience is too, that all but very few TV reporters are innocent children when set beside knowledgeable newspaper reporters.

What the TV people have in place of knowledge or wisdom is technique and an unerring sense of ritual. They can fit the world together, make sense of it, in a way that other journalists cannot. They make life a dramatic pageant, a series of interesting and satisfying vignettes. They never bore us with the more cumbersome details of reality or the awkward corners of events. The underlying message of their broadcasts is that one plausibly described little event is very much like another.

In this way television news responds to one of our most profound needs: it reduces the chaos of the day to something approaching order. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has explained that human beings are "symbolizing, conceptualizing, meaning-seeking" animals who wish to "make sense out of our experience, to give it form and order." It is this form that the TV reporter is reaching for as he fits his film and his commentary into a carefully organized "story". Geertz's studies of various primitive tribes convince him that humanity's need for order and explanation is "evidently as real and as pressing as the more familiar biological needs," sustenance and sex. There was a time when many of us routinely satisfied this pattern-seeking need through religion; for people from whose lives religious belief has departed, the manipulation of information about the world provides a kind of substitute. TV manipulates information better than any other medium, and however sceptical we are in most other ways we tend to believe in TV news during the time we are watching it. Indeed, I think we badly want to believe in it.

Those people who appear on our television sets every night, showing us their film and explaining what it means, occupy a unique place where the history of technology and the history of culture come together. Technology has made their work possible. Culture — which now acknowledges that almost everything in the universe is uncertain - has made their work extremely important to us, perhaps even necessary. Their central function is to make an incomprehensible world seem, for a few minutes, comprehensible.

(1984)