

*Back in 1983, approximately **50 corporations** controlled the vast majority of all news media in the United States. Today, ownership of the news media has been concentrated in the hands of **just six incredibly powerful media** corporations. These corporations control most of what we watch, hear and read every single day. They own television networks, cable channels, movie studios, newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, music labels and even many of our favorite websites. Sadly, most Americans don't really seem to care about who owns the media. But they should. The truth is that each of us is deeply influenced by the messages that are constantly being pounded into our heads by the mainstream media.*

John Rappaport - January 28, 2013 - How Television News Creates the Illusion of Knowledge

I want to discuss the myth of “coverage.” It’s familiar to every viewer. Scott Pelley, in seamless fashion, might say, “Our top story tonight, the widening conflict in Syria. For the latest on the Assad government crackdown, our coverage begins with Clarissa Ward in Damascus...” .

Clarissa Ward has entered the country secretly, posing as a tourist. She carries a small camera. In interviews with rebels, she discovers that a) there is a conflict, b) people are being arrested c) there is a funeral for a person who was killed by government soldiers, d) defiance among the citizenry is growing. In other words, she tells us almost nothing. But CBS is imparting the impression that her report is important. After all, it’s not just anchor Scott Pelley in the studio. It’s a journalist in the field, up close and personal. It’s coverage.

Here are a few of the many things we don’t learn from either Pelley or Ward. Who is behind the rebellion in Syria? What is their real goal? What covert role is the US playing? Why are there al Qaeda personnel there? But who cares? We have coverage. A key hole view. It’s wonderful. It’s exciting for two minutes. Coverage in television means you have the money, crew, resources, and stand-up reporters you can send out into the field. That’s all it means. It has nothing to do with information.

CNN made its reputation by coverage, from one end of the planet to the other. Yet, what did we really learn in all those years? We learned that, by straining to the point of hernia, a cable network could present news non-stop, 24/7.

The trick of coverage is the smooth transition from anchor in the studio to reporter in the field. The reporter is standing in front of something that vaguely resembles or represents what we imagine the locale contains. A large squat government building, a tower, a marketplace, a river, a skyline.



At some point during the meaningless report, the screen splits and we see both the anchor and the reporter. This yields the impression of two concerned professionals discussing something significant. Then we’re back to the reporter in the field filling up the whole screen. The anchor closes with a question or two.

“Denise, have you seen any tanks in the area?”

“No Wolf, not in the last hour. But we have reports from last night of shelling in the village.”

Well, isn’t this marvelous. Wolf is in Atlanta and Denise is in Patagonia. And they’re talking to each other in real time. Therefore, they must be on top of what’s going on.

“Denise, we understand medical help arrived a short time ago.”

“Yes, Wolf. Out in the desert, in tents, surgeons are performing emergency operations on the wounded.”

We went from Atlanta to a street corner in the capital of Patagonia and then to a hotel room in the city, and then back to the street corner, then to Atlanta, off to a commercial, and then back to the studio for teasers on a new film. The

technology and the technique are indeed impressive. The knowledge imparted is hovering at absolute zero, but it doesn't matter. They have coverage.

Bonanza of Coverage

Then we have the bonanza of coverage, a story that deals cards to several reporters in the field at different locations. As always, the anchor retains control. He may have two or three reporters on screen at the same time after they individually file their thirty-second pieces. There is a bit of crosstalk. The anchor mediates. The shipment of frozen food was tainted. Therefore, we have a reporter standing in front of FDA headquarters in Maryland, another reporter in front of the manufacturer's home office in Indiana, and a third reporter outside a hospital emergency room in San Francisco, where a child is having his stomach pumped. There is also a three-second clip of a lab in which workers in white coats and masks are moving around, and a clip of a moving assembly line which presumably has something to do with the production of the tainted product.

The whole story, as the network tells it, could be compressed down to 20 seconds, total. But they want coverage. On election night, a network could simply show three or four newsmen sitting around in shirtsleeves smoking cigars and talking about the Jets for a few hours, after which one of them says, "Obama just won."

But instead, we get the circus. A half-dozen stand-ups from various campaign headquarters, a numbers guru with a high-tech map as big as a movie screen pulling up counties in the studio, an anchor "bringing it all together," and pundits weighing in with sage estimates. Team coverage. The "best in the business."

I love hearing Wolf Blitzer utter that line. It makes me think of a guy selling expired cheese. But after all, he has a right to promote his people. He's not just in a studio, he's in The Situation Room. Where there is coverage.

The height of absurdity is achieved during a violent storm. A reporter has to be standing out in the rain and vicious wind, water seeping into his shoes, holding an umbrella in one hand and a mic in the other, looking for all the world like the umbrella is going to take him up into the sky.

The storm could be shot from inside a store at ground level, and the reporter could be sitting in a chair next to the cash register peering out through the window, but that wouldn't really be coverage.

Nothing Made Into Something

If you were to compare the anchor/reporter-in-the-field relationship of 40 years ago to today, you'd see a stark difference. In days of yore, it was exceedingly clunky and clumsy. It was one anchor and one reporter, but at least the man in the field was expected to have something to say. Now it's all flash and intercutting. Now it's the technique. The facile blending. The rapid interchange of image. It's nothing made into something.

Segueways and blends are far more important than content. The newsmen are there merely to illustrate smoothness and transition. Brian Williams (NBC) is the champion operator for this mode. He is the doctor who can impart to you a diagnosis of a disease that doesn't exist, but you don't care. He's a fine waiter in an expensive restaurant who will deliver three small items in the center of a very large plate and make you feel honored. He's a golfer with such a fine swing you don't care how many strokes he takes to get to the green. When he shifts to his man or woman in the field, you feel he's conferring knighthood. Brian knows coverage.

In the second Gulf War, we were bombarded with studio and field reports, but we saw no engagement or conflict that exposed both sides in simultaneous action against each other. Embedded reporters had to pledge the life of their first-born they wouldn't break a rule laid down for journalists by the Army command. **Modern network coverage does one important thing. It establishes a standard by which other news is measured. For most viewers, if the news can't display full technique, full smoothness, full effortless transition, it must be lacking in some important, though undefined, way.**

Coverage is almost synonymous with transition. How the news moves from anchor to reporter(s) and back is Value. This is highly significant because it mirrors what a good hypnotist is able to do. If he's a real pro, he doesn't just put someone in a trance and talk to him, he puts him under and then moves from one topic to another—without breaking the trance. This is a skill. In fact, the hypnotist's transitions are a vital aspect of the process itself. The patient feels the guidance as the scene changes before his eyes. The hypnotist (or news anchor) is presenting scene after scene and extending time without causing a jarring ripple in the still lake of consciousness.

Whatever a person learns in a trance state, while, for example, watching the news, functions somewhat differently from what he learns while he is awake. Trance learning doesn't add content or knowledge so much as it produces an attitude toward reality. There is a difference between the facts of reality and an attitude during reality. The media tells you: THESE are the parameters of reality, but THOSE aren't. I care THIS much, I don't care THAT much. I care in THIS way, and not in THAT way. I'm at THIS distance from what is happening, not at THAT distance.