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# Designing Credibility

*An Analysis of the Visual Aesthetics of Television News*

In 1986, a study found that 64% of Americans said they get most of their news from television. However, on an average weekday in 1986 the amount of people who read a newspaper was almost double the number people who watched television news programs. Why did people *think* they got most of their news from television when they were looking at it less often than other news sources like newspapers and radio? The answer is simple: they thought that television was more believable.[1]

This raises the question: why do we think that television is such a credible news source? There is no real evidence that television is more credible than other type of media. In fact, with the increased use of video news releases[2], one could argue that television news is not trustworthy at all. However, television news does have one major advantage over other forms of media: it is extremely visual. News shows use this to their advantage by strategically using visuals to present the news in a way that viewers can identify with and in turn trust. Although one might argue that newspapers are also very visual, television contains many more visual elements; each segment on a television news show contains a plethora of visual information, while individual newspaper articles may only contain some text and a couple images.

Every little detail from the graphics to the anchor's appearance play a role in how we interpret what we see on television. These visual aesthetics are especially important in news programs since "the audience…can fluctuate considerably from day to day."[3] Most people are not loyal to one news program; instead they choose what to watch each night, based on what looks most appealing. Therefore, a program must be able to convince a viewer that it is credible in a matter of seconds; otherwise the viewer may change the channel. Although it may not be immediately apparent to us, the visual aesthetics of television news programs play a major role in our decision of whether or not we should watch and trust a show.

## The News Environment

At first sight, the visuals placed behind the anchors and reporters may seem like a generic backdrop. However, studio environments are carefully designed to give importance and credibility to the people in the foreground. Early television news programs tried connote credibility by placing anchors in a set that resembled a large personal library. The sets usually

consisted of "a wine table, centre, flanked by a couple of repro' Chippendale armed chairs in front of a Regency library stock set."[4] While this setup was preferred by directors for many years because it seemed imply that the anchors and reporters were knowledgeable intellectuals, many set designers despised the look of these programs. In particular, Natasha Kroll, a set designer for the BBC, "[abhorred] the visual dishonesty that made a studio interview appear to be taking place in a book-lined study."[5] This hatred inspired Kroll to design a new visual model for television news, when she became the head of the Studio Design Unit for the BBC's news programs.

*Kroll's influence is apparent in this still from the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite. Notice how the abstract design does not encourage you to think of the set as anything else besides a television*

Kroll's main goal was to create a set in which "the viewer would be aware that such an event was occurring in a television studio."[6] Before Kroll, television news viewers were forced to suspend their disbelief and pretend that the program was actually taking place in a study, like they did when they watched fictional programs. However, Kroll found this concept to be contradictory, since the news, unlike other programs, was supposed to be viewed as reality.[7] In order to make it seem realistic, she created a simplified studio (only containing a couple chairs and a desk), which was so minimal and abstract that the viewer was no longer motivated to pretend that the studio was anything but a television studio.

Although directors were at first reluctant to accept Kroll's radical designs, they eventually became the norm for news programs, and the concept of abstract environments is now embraced by all news set designers. Nowadays, anchors are often placed in extremely minimal studios surrounded by computer graphics of abstract shapes and colors that change as they move from one segment to another. It has also become fairly common to have a camera zoom out enough to allow the viewer to see the other cameras and equipment, which helps further the notion that the viewer is supposed to be aware that it is taking place in a television studio.

In contrast to the in-studio anchors, reporters have always been placed in front of very realistic backdrops. Whenever reporting from the field, reporters are posed in front of major icons, which already have some significance to the viewer (White House, Capitol Hill, overlooking a Middle Eastern city). Even if the story is actually taking place inside the halls of Capitol Hill, "the

reporter must leave 'the scene'…in order to locate himself 'symbolically'."[8] These carefully planned backdrops are used to give the report "visual authenticity," they convince us as viewers that the reporter is truly at a location, which seems familiar to us, and he/she has the most up-to-date information on the situation.

*Although Suzanne Malveaux's report is based on a private event in the White House that is only viewable via satellite, she is still posed in front of the White House while delivering her report.*

Even if it is not necessary for a reporter to actually be present at the scene, reporters are still sent out to cover events on-location. An extreme example of this is a BBC report, from 1980, on France's reaction to a European summit. The reporter in the story traveled all the way to France to simply pose on a Parisian street while holding three French newspapers, and paraphrasing the headlines.[9] The content of this report was completely verbal (it did not require any visuals); however the reporter knew that his viewers needed to see the proper backdrop and props to be convinced of the report's credibility.

Inside the studio, there are also a variety of props, all of which play a symbolic role in our interpretation of the news. One prop that has become extremely popular on American evening news shows is the clock. Walls of clocks, all set for different time zones, are generally used as part of the backdrop for programs that focus on international affairs. These clocks "allude to the simultaneity in time of all the world's separate locations,"[10] and give the viewer a sense that the program is really in touch with all the different parts of the world. However, as technology improves news programs now rely on other props to show off their connectedness with the rest of the world. A similar effect is now achieved by placing the anchor in front of a stack of monitors, with each monitor displaying live video from different parts of the world.

However, a stack of monitors is a much more powerful prop than a wall of clocks. The monitors, in addition to symbolizing a program's connectedness to the world, also convince the viewer that they are watching the world and that they will be 'on the scene' as soon as a story breaks. These monitors can also be used by anchors to communicate with reporters and guests while maintaining his/her dominance in the news room. Ted Koppel, former host of ABC's *Nightline*,

explained that "even guests *in* the studio [did] not share his physical space,"[11] which gave him a tremendous advantage: he was the only one able to see everyone, and he was comfortable talking directly to a camera, unlike most of his guests.[12] This power gives the anchor on a news program an almost god-like presence in this abstract environment.

*The set of the NBC Nightly News surrounds Tom Brokaw with dozens of monitors. These monitors make us feel as if the program is closely monitoring the world around us.*

However, the most popular prop in television news is the desk. Almost every news show places the anchor at a circular desk, which extends beyond the frame. This places the viewer at the other end of this desk, and creates "a visual link between the journalistic working space and the audience's living room."[13] This link makes watching the television news more of a personal experience, reminiscent of a discussion with an acquaintance rather than a speech from a distant person that is being broadcast to millions of other people.

## Graphics

As technology improves, the networks try to incorporate more and more computer graphics into their television news shows. However, these graphics are not simply decorative; they too influence our interpretation of the television news. Graphics are most commonly used in television news to provide a seamless flow between segments, especially when dealing with breaking news.[14]

Computer graphics are the first things a viewer sees when there is 'breaking news,' and they play an important role in convincing the viewer that this announcement has priority over the regularly scheduled programming.[15] These 'breaking news' animations usually contain text and graphics that fly onto the screen, which symbolizes that this story is being rushed to the viewer's screen as quickly as possible. The motion of these objects also implies that this important event is in motion, and not just something static from the past. Finally, it is extremely important that the viewers see "crisp


*The breaking news graphic, pictured above, utilizes motion and italicized text to make the report seem urgent and live. It also uses smooth and crisp graphics to convince the viewer of the report's credibility.*

[and] vibrant animated graphics,"[16] in these 'breaking news' graphics. A crisp and professional looking graphic makes viewers feel as if this report deserves priority over their interrupted shows, and that they should give their undivided attention to the anchor and reporters. For this reason, one of the most important and expensive purchases for news stations is a machine that generates computer graphics.

Within the news programs, graphics are used strategically to appeal to a diverse range of viewers. One example of a strategic graphic is an image from a Canadian television news show, which was used during the vote on whether or not Quebec should separate itself from Canada. The image consisted of a "ballot box covered with a maple leaf on the left, and a fleur-de-lis on the right, plus a hand depositing a ballot."[17] On one level, this graphic represents the vote on Quebec's separation, indicated by the ballot box with the image of Canada's flag on one side and Quebec's flag on the other side. However, the signified meaning is strategically ambiguous. Depending on a viewer's political view, this ballot box and hand also signifies a vote for "No" or "Yes."[18] The use of an ambiguous signified meaning allows the news program to convince the viewer that it has similar political opinions. Therefore the show seems like it is a more trustworthy and relevant news source for each viewer, no matter what his/her political affiliations may be.

The placement of these graphics can sometimes be just as visually important as the content. The 'story box' is one of the most common graphics in modern television news. This box displays images that relate to the current segment, right above the shoulder of the anchor. This placement that we often take for granted sends a powerful message to the viewer. Due to the image's similarity to a 'thought bubble' from cartoons and comic books, viewers tend to subconsciously interpret these images as the inner thoughts of the anchor. This convention offers "proof that the anchor *really does* harbor knowledge inside of him; he *is* sincere."[19]

## The Anchor, The Sage

News anchors are an integral part of the visual aesthetics of television news, and their presence is one of the main reasons why people choose television over newspapers. Newspapers do not place much emphasis on who is reporting the stories, which leads readers to believe that the articles are merely

*Notice how anchors receive equal billing, and are considered just as important as the news itself.*

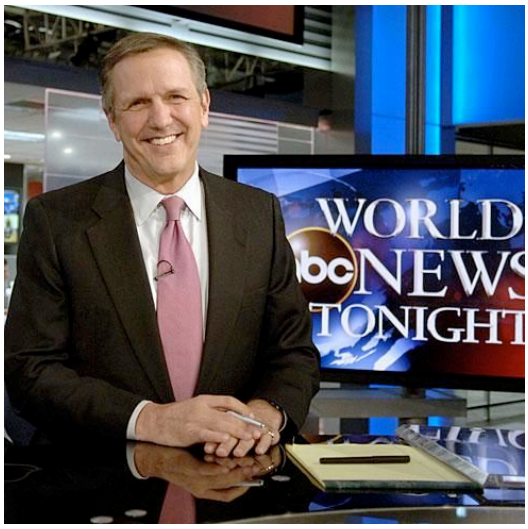
the work of several anonymous writers.[20] However, in television news reports, the presenter is just as important as the story itself. And, since the networks work hard to find anchors with whom viewers feel comfortable and acquainted, viewers tend to think that these programs are more credible than newspapers. But, why do viewers feel so comfortable with news anchors?

One reason why viewers may feel comfortable with their news anchors is the parental appearance of an anchor, which has become a common trait across the networks. One of the first, and most obvious, instances of this was Walter Cronkite, who in the 1950s accentuated his paternal appearance by taking out his pipe, "an emblem… [of] national paterfamilias,"[21] during the credits of every broadcast. While the use of a pipe to symbolize paternity was specific to Cronkite, many of his other fatherly qualities have been mimicked by news anchors over the years. One of his key traits was his manner of speaking and presenting. Anchors, like Cronkite, present themselves as reassuring characters who report the news in such a way that it makes "bad news seem less alarming,"[22] like a father explaining the death of a relative to his child. Even female reporters, like Barbara Walters, were inspired by Cronkite's paternal approach, and decided to put their own spin on it. Rather than trying to play the role of the strong father figure, Walters chose to play the role of the "maternal intercessor, wheedlingly mitigating authority by her pleas for mercy."[23]

Another reason for the comfort we feel with our news anchors is that they simulate real personal contact. Unlike most television shows "the presence of the viewer… [in news programs] is directly acknowledged at least twice,"[24] and the anchor makes eye contact with the viewer throughout most of the program. This acknowledgement of the viewer makes it seem as if the anchor is really talking to the viewer on a personal level, and "cloaks what [the program really] is, after all, an impersonal transmission."[25] This tactic also aids in convincing viewers that they get most of their news from television, since people are more likely to remember information told to them by a person than information they have read without the association of a human face. This manner of presentation also gives more credibility to the information presented, since people are prone to remember the details from news shows as if they heard them from an acquaintance.

*Peter Jennings' (above) ability to interact with the camera like a person rather than machine made him an extremely successful news anchor.*

There are also many subtle actions that can add to an anchor's credibility. First of all, an anchor's use of a teleprompter makes it seem as if he/she is recounting the details of the today's events and making connections to other stories from memory, which gives the impression that this person has infinite knowledge of the news. News shows take this idea one step further and try to convince viewers that not only do their anchors *know* the news, they *control* the news. They accomplish this quite easily through the use of simple tool: the pen. Many news shows nowadays open with a shot of the anchor in the midst of writing on his/her notes. This visual is very powerful, since it conveys the idea that this person was writing/creating the news that he/she is about to report on, as if they have some kind of control over world events.




*Although a pen is not really a useful tool for news anchors, Charles Gibson (above) from ABC News was shown with not one but two pens. The pen sends a subconscious message to the viewer that the anchor makes the news.*

The anchor of a news program is usually characterized as an all-knowing sage, but at the same time he/she "is a real and accessible person."[26] These people seem sincere and likable, which leads us as viewers to identify with them and allow them to "become stand-ins for *us* in the television discourse."[27] And, since they appear to be acting on *our* behalf, we are inclined to trust them, sometimes even more than our elected officials. In fact, polls once showed that Walter Cronkite was the most trusted man in America.[28] Despite the fact that the news anchor persona is completely unrealistic, we still believe in them because of their appearance and actions that seem to suggest they are truly all-knowing, trustworthy and real.

The television news is a carefully constructed object of our visual culture. Every little detail, from the animations to the anchor's pen, is designed to persuade viewers to believe that the program is a trustworthy recap of current events. These visual tactics have proven to be extremely effective and have convinced many people that television is truly the most credible news source available. However, the true credibility of these programs is questionable, since many of the strategies used today to convince viewers of a program's credibility are nothing more than visual trickery.

[1] Hallin, Daniel C. Watching Television. Ed. Todd Gitlin. New York, N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1986. 27.
[2] Video news releases are news segments created by corporations or political parties that seem like normal field reports, but in fact support specific ideologies.
[3] Hallin, Daniel C. 27.
[4] Britton, Piers D., and Simon J. Barker. Reading Between Designs. Austin, TX: University of Texas P, 2003. 30.
[5] Lodge, Bernard. "Obituary: Natasha Kroll." The Guardian 7 Apr. 2005. http://arts.guardian.co.uk/news/obituary/0,,1187271,00.html.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Britton, Piers D., and Simon J. Barker. 30.
[8] Morse, Margaret. Studies in Entertainment. Ed. Tania Modleski. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana UP, 1986. 71.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Conrad, Peter. Television: the Medium and Its Manners. Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982. 139.
[11] Morse, Margaret. 69.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Rowland Jr., Willard D., and Bruce Watkins, eds. Interpreting Television: Current Research Perspectives. London, England: Sage Publications, 1984. 207.
[14] Fabac, Michael. "KLRT-TV Gets a New Look with Chyron's Graphics-Creation Equipment." Broadcast Engineering Oct. 2005: 114. Proquest. Folsom Library, Troy.
[15] Morse, Margaret. 72.
[16] Fabac, Michael. 114.
[17] Rowland Jr., Willard D., and Bruce Watkins. 211.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Morse, Margaret. 70.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Conrad, Peter. 137.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid. 135.
[24] Britton, Piers D., and Simon J. Barker. 30.
[25] Allen, Robert C., and Annette Hill, eds. The Television Studies Reader. London, England: Routledge, 2004. 210.
[26] Ibid. 65.
[27] Rowland Jr., Willard D., and Bruce Watkins, eds. 217.
[28] Hallin, Daniel C. 27.

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