HOW TO WATCH TV NEWS

Neil Postman
and Steve Powers

With New and Updated Material
by Steve Powers

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Author's Note

I WAS FORTUNATE TO HAVE a preeminent scholar and prescient thinker, Neil Postman, as both my teacher and coauthor for the original edition of *How to Watch TV News*. Unfortunately, he died on October 5, 2003, before this revision of the book.

His forward thinking, insights, and seminal work on the original manuscript remain largely intact; my mentor's teachings permeate each page. I miss his counsel, original thoughts, sense of humor, and friendship.

STEVE POWERS
NOVEMBER 2007

CHAPTER 3

Getting Them into the Electronic Tent

AT CARNIVAL SIDESHOWS, THE barkers used to shout intriguing things to attract an audience. "Step right up. For one thin dime, see what men have died for and others lusted after. The dance of the veils as only Tanya can do it." The crowd would gather as lovely Tanya, wrapped in diaphanous garb, would wiggle a bit, tease and entice grown men who should have known better to part with their money for a ticket. Instead of seeing Tanya shed her clothes, her customers only shed their money.

In television news there is no Tanya that we know of, but there are plenty of Sonyas, Marias, Ricks, and Brads who have the job of getting you into the electronic tent. They come on the air and try to intrigue you with come-ons to get you to watch their show. "Step right up" becomes "coming up at eleven o'clock." And instead of veils you get a glimpse of videotape that may intrigue you enough to part with your time instead of a dime. It is no accident that in the television news industry the short blurb aimed at getting you to watch a program is called a "tease." Sometimes it delivers what it

advertises, but often it draws us into the electronic tent and keeps us there long enough that we don't remember why we were there in the first place.

The tease is designed to be very effective, very quickly. By definition, a tease lasts about ten seconds or less, and the information it contains works like a headline. Its purpose is to grab your attention and keep you watching. In the blink of a tease, you are enticed to stay tuned with promises of exclusive stories and tape, good-looking anchors, helicopters, team coverage, hidden cameras, uniform blazers, and even, yes, better journalism. It is all designed to stop you from using the remote-control button to switch channels. But the teasing doesn't stop there. During the news program, just before each commercial, you will see what are known as "bumpers," teases that are aimed at keeping you in the tent and from straying to another channel where other wonders are being touted. And the electronic temptations do not even cease with the end of the program. When the news show is over, you are still being pleaded with "not to turn that dial" and to tune in the next day for an early morning newscast, which in turn will entice you to watch the next news program and so on. If news programmers had it their way, you would watch a steady diet of news programs, one hooking you into the next with only slight moments of relief during station breaks.

If you think you can beat the system by not watching teases, you'll need to think again. We are dealing with serious professional hucksters. On his Web site, Graeme Newell touts himself as a speaker and trainer who shows cable and broadcast teams how to "effectively market and tease their shows." He says he trains broadcast teams how to identify the most sellable components of a show, then teaches specific writing and producing techniques to showcase those strong components. He holds workshops on teasing, and his Web site trumpets, "In

most shops, producers are bringing their journalism skills to teasing. But teasing isn't journalism. *Teasing is advertising*" (the emphasis is ours). The game plan, aimed at getting you to watch the news, starts even before you have seen the first tease. It starts while you're watching the entertainment shows before the news. One device used is called the "snipe," an animated graphic that runs at the bottom of the screen, promoting the next show. At the Emmy Awards show in 2007, comedian Lewis Black showed his frustration at snipes, telling the audience, "We don't care about the next show. We're watching this show."

Whether you know it or not, we are programmed to watch the news, by programmers. They know that most of us tend to be lazy. Even with remote controls at our fingertips, we are likely to stay tuned to the channel we have been watching. So the United Couch Potatoes of America sit, and sit, and sit, and before they know it, Marsha and Rick have hooked us into their news program, promising "team coverage," no less, of today's latest disaster. In textbook vernacular, the lead-in programs must leave a residual audience for the news shows that follow. To put it plainly, a station with a strong lineup of entertainment programs can attract a large audience to the news tent. High-rated shows such as *Oprah*, programmed just before the news, bring in a big audience and premium prices at the broadcast marketplace. This is why the best news program may not have ratings as high as a news program with a strong lead-in. It may not be fair, but it is television.

Now, let us say all things are equal. Station A and station B both have excellent lead-ins. What news program will you watch? Most people will say something like, "I want to watch the latest news, the best reporting, with state-of-the-art technology, presented by people I can trust and respect."

But while people might say they like the most experienced journalists presenting the news, many news consultants claim

that no matter what they say, the audience prefers to watch good-looking, likable people it can relate to (perhaps of the same age group, race, etc.). News organizations spend a lot of time and money building up the reputations of their anchors, sending them to high-visibility stories they hope will convince viewers they are watching top-level journalists. Unfortunately, in some markets the top anchors are sometimes "hat racks" who read beautifully but can barely type a sentence or two without the aid of a producer and writer. They may know how to anchor, but many are strictly lightweights. In television, looking the part is better than being the real item, a situation you would rightly reject in other contexts. Imagine going to a doctor who hadn't studied medicine but rather looks like a doctor: authoritative, kindly, understanding, and surrounded by formidable machinery. We assume you would reject such a professional fraud, especially if he or she had majored in theater arts in college. But this kind of playacting is perfectly acceptable in the world of television news and entertainment, where actors who have played lawyers on a TV series frequently are called on to give speeches at lawyers' conventions and men who have played doctors are invited to speak at gatherings of medical professionals. If you can read news convincingly on television, you can have a successful career as an anchor, no journalism experience required. This is not to say that there aren't bright men and women who are knowledgeable journalists and who can and do serve as anchors. But the problem is that it is almost impossible for the viewer to figure out which anchor knows his stuff and who's faking it. A good anchor is a good actor, and with the lift of an eyebrow or with studied seriousness of visage, he or she can convince you that you are seeing the real thing; that is, a concerned, solid journalist.

Case in point: actress, bikini model, and former WWE wrestler Lauren Jones signed a thirty-day contract to anchor

the news on CBS19 in East Texas starting in June 2007. CBS19 president and general manager Phil Hurley was quoted as saying, "Don't let the blonde hair and modeling credentials fool you . . . she can do the job." However, Ms. Jones had no journalism training or experience; she got the job as a contestant on the Fox show *Anchorwoman*, a program that was canceled after one showing due to awful ratings.

At this point, you may wonder what difference it makes. Even if one cannot distinguish an experienced journalist from a good actor playing the part of an experienced journalist, isn't the news the same? Not quite. An experienced journalist is likely to have a sense of what is particularly relevant about a story, and thus insist on including certain facts, and a perspective the actor-anchor would have no knowledge of. Of course, it is true that often an experienced journalist, working behind the cameras, has prepared the script for the actor-anchor. But when the anchor is himself or herself a journalist, the story is likely to be given additional dimensions. We got a glimpse of this on March 30, 1981, during *ABC Evening News* anchor Frank Reynolds's live news coverage of the assassination attempt on U.S. president Ronald Reagan. All three networks had erroneously reported that White House press secretary James Brady, a close friend of Reynolds's, had died from the head wound he suffered in the incident. After learning on-screen that this information was incorrect, Reynolds suddenly appeared noticeably upset and angrily burst out: "Let's get it *nailed down* . . . somebody . . . let's find out! Let's get it straight so we can report this thing accurately!" The network quickly moved to a break and upon return straightened out the facts.

Even if there are no differences between the stories presented by actor-anchors and journalist-anchors, the fact that the audience is being deluded into thinking that an actor-anchor is

a journalist contributes a note of fakery to the enterprise. It encourages producers and news directors to think about what they are doing as artifice, as a show in which truth-telling is less important than the appearance of truth-telling. One can hardly blame them. They know that everything depends on winning the audience's favor, and the anchor is the key weapon in their arsenal.

If you are skeptical about the importance of the anchor in attracting the audience to the electronic tent, you must ask yourself why they are paid so much. It's estimated that Katie Couric signed a contract with CBS worth $15 million a year: $60,000 a day. ABC News' Charles Gibson earned $7 million a year when he took the job in May 2006. Diane Sawyer earns a reported $12 million a year. Brian Williams started out as an NBC anchor at $4 million a year. When the ratings for the *CBS Evening News with Katie Couric* dipped to 5.9 million for a week in 2007, CBS was paying $2.51 per viewer. By comparison, Mr. Gibson was delivering the audience for $0.89 per viewer, and Mr. Williams was a bargain at about $0.55 a head. Even local anchors can be paid as much as $750,000 to $1 million, and that's without serious journalistic credentials. Anchors who work for network-affiliated stations in the top twenty-five markets make an average of $260,000 a year. Nationwide, the average anchor, as of this writing, makes $72,400 a year, according to a Ball State University and Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) survey.

So there you are, ready to watch the news presented by a high-priced anchor, and on comes the show, complete with a fancy opening and music that sounds as though it was composed for a Hollywood epic. The host appears: an anchor god or goddess sculpted on Mount Arbitron—at least the best of them. But even the worst looks authoritative. Of course, the anchor has had plenty of help from plenty of craftspeople in

creating the illusion of calm omniscience. After all, it's not all hair spray. That glittering, well-coiffed, commanding presence has been placed in a setting that has been designed, built, and painted to make him or her look as wonderful as possible. Consultants have been used to make sure the lights are fine-tuned to highlight hair and fill in wrinkles. Color experts have complemented the star's complexion with favorable background hues. Short anchors sit on raised seats to look taller. Makeup has been applied to create just the right look: accenting cheekbones, covering baldness, enlarging small eyes, hiding blemishes, perhaps obscuring a double chin.

And, of course, there is camera magic. A low camera angle can make a slight anchor look imposing. Long and medium shots, rather than close-ups, can hide bags under the eyes. There are lenses that blur facial wrinkles, if necessary. The anchor-star has probably had the benefit of a clothing allowance and the best hairdressers and consultants. At the local level, expert stagecraft is employed. At the pinnacle of TV anchordom, the networks, the best in the craft work their magic.

When Katie Couric took over the *CBS Evening News*, the newscast underwent a massive makeover, from soup to nuts or, in this case, from set to notes. The National Ministry of Design (its actual name, not affiliated with the government) was brought in to create a new look to sweep away the remnants of Dan Rather and "Couricize" the program. The *Boston Globe* reported that designer Jean McCarville said, "the firm began by asking CBS executives to reel off adjectives, ideas about the message they wanted to project. The network offered 'classy,' 'elegant,' and 'timeless.' " CBS wanted to suggest that Couric would be accessible and warm, and have more interaction with reporters and viewers. Ned Biddle, National Ministry's executive producer for the project, recalled executives saying, half-jokingly, that they wanted things to look

expensive. So the designers studied ads for expensive things: architecture, cars, jewelry. They noticed a common theme, McCarville says, "a certain shininess" as light glints off diamonds and chrome. They made light virtually glint off the CBS eye logo's letters and curves. To represent Couric, they added warm gold and orange tones. Designers also lifted the curves from the CBS eye and began to wrap nearly everything in them, from the teaser videos at the top of the show to the images that appear over Couric's shoulder as she introduces a story. Woman anchor . . . curves.

The old theme music also had to go. James Horner, the Academy Award–winning composer who has written songs and scores for one hundred movies, including *Titanic*, was called in to write new music: ten seconds of auditory imagery. He met with Couric, and it's reported that *she* told him she wanted something that reminded her of wheat fields instead of the Manhattan skyline. The program's executive producer at the time, Rome Hartman, said he wanted something "flexible, yet memorable. Regal and encompassing the grand history of CBS News, yet moving forward." Joel Beckerman of Man Made Music was also brought in. He supplied more than one hundred short pieces of music, including a dozen variations on the theme, to be used as the mood of the lead story changes from night to night. It is cosmetic television at its finest.

The music fades, and the parade of stories and the people reporting them begins. On the local level, whom you see on the tube depends sometimes on professional competence and journalistic ability. But it may also depend on the results of focus groups where ordinary viewers are shown videotapes and then asked which anchors and reporters they prefer to watch and why. The group gives its opinion without the benefit of observing a performer over a period of time or knowledge of

the reporter's background and experience. What is wanted is an immediate, largely emotional reaction. Performers are also evaluated by a service called TVQ, which claims to rate television performers on the basis of public recognition. The company that provides this service, Marketing Evaluations/TVQ, polls about 1,200 Americans by mail. The Q Score is a product of popularity, rated on a scale of one to five, and familiarity among respondents. The results are sold to networks, advertising agencies, and anyone else willing to spend a few thousand dollars to find out someone's Q Score. From time to time, Gallup also does a poll to try to determine the likability of TV personalities. In one poll, Diane Sawyer had the highest overall favorable rating of those tested, followed by Charles Gibson, Matt Lauer, Dan Rather, Regis Philbin, Bob Schieffer, and Brian Williams. Ranking close to the middle were Barbara Walters, Katie Couric, Anderson Cooper, Meredith Vieira, Lou Dobbs, and Larry King. Geraldo Rivera, Star Jones, and Rosie O'Donnell had negative ratings.

Some news-show consultants believe in forming a television news pseudofamily to attract audiences. After the *Today* show started to slide in the ratings in 1991, NBC brought back sportscaster Joe Garagiola to try to pep up ratings. Garagiola had been on the program from 1967 to 1973. NBC had alienated its viewers by replacing popular coanchor Jane Pauley with Deborah Norville, who was supposed to be a hot ratings getter. She wasn't. The show nose-dived. Executives realized they needed something or somebody with pizzazz. They reached for a person who, they hoped, could make the *Today* show a family again: warm, affable Joe Garagiola. The return of the prodigal son. Exit Norville, cast out as the "other woman." The *Today* family is now led by Matt Lauer and Meredith Vieira (who replaced Couric as glamorous mom); Al Roker is the clown weatherman, and Ann Curry does the news. Former

clown-weatherman Willard Scott now makes guest appearances with his popular centenarian birthday segments on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The family concept is at work at many local stations. The anchors will probably be a couple, male and female, both good-looking and in the same relative age category: the husband and wife (although in our modern society, with second marriages common, the male anchor may be twenty years older than his female counterpart). The other "family" members may include an Archie and a Veronica to appeal to the younger set: Archie the sportscaster, who never tires of watching videotapes of highlights and bloopers, and Veronica the weatherperson. There is also Mr. or Ms. Breathless Showbiz who always feigns being thrilled to see the heartthrob or hottest rock group of the moment.

Whatever kind of television family is presented, it always has one thing in common. It is a happy family where everybody gets along with everyone else (at least for thirty minutes) and knows his or her place. The viewer usually gets to see the whole "family" at the top, or beginning, of the show. They will either be featured in a taped introduction or be sitting on the set en masse, to create a sense of cohesion and stability. Throughout the program, members of the family will come to the set and do their turn, depending on their specialty. No newscast is complete without Archie the sportscaster rattling off a list of clichés that he believes bond him to his fans: "Yes!" "In your face!" "Let's go to the videotape!" "Swish!"

Theoretically, sportscasters are supposed to be reporters, not fans. But depending on what they believe to be at the root of their popularity, or what team is featured on their station, they might decide to bask in the glorious light of sports heroes and become cheerleaders. It is, in any event, the sportscaster's job to keep the audience excited with taped highlights and

interviews with the top players, who often have nothing more to contribute than standard-brand sports-hero remarks: "It's not important how I played, as long as I can contribute to the team," or "I might have scored a few more touchdowns, but the real credit has to go to the front line who made it all possible." Picture and cliché blend to fill the eye with a sense of action and the nose with the macho smell of the locker room.

No newscast would be complete without a weather report, which usually starts with a review of what already happened that day. The report is supposedly made interesting by moving *H*s and *L*s, and by making clouds and isobars stalk across a map. Whatever the weather, the one thing you can always count on is a commercial break *before* tomorrow's weather forecast. You can also count on the peculiar tendency of anchors to endow the weatherperson with godlike meteorological powers: "Well, Veronica, I hope you'll bring us some relief from this rain." To which the reply is something like, "Oh, Chuck, I'm afraid we've got some more rain coming tomorrow, but wait till you see what I've got for you this weekend."

If you have ever wondered why all this fuss is made about the weather, the answer is that, for reasons no one knows, weather information is of almost universal interest. This means that it usually attracts an attentive audience, which in turn means it provides a good environment for commercials. An executive producer of the *CBS This Morning* show has remarked that research shows weather news is the most important reason why people watch TV in the morning. The weather segments also give the anchors a chance to banter with the weather people and lighten the proceedings. A pleasing personality is almost certainly more important to a weathercaster than a degree in meteorology. How significant personality is can be gauged by what these weather people earn. Weather

people in small markets earn an average of $21,980 a year, according to the National Association of Broadcasters. Weathercasters make an average of $91,000 in the top twenty-five markets, with some earning a $500,000 or more. Nonetheless, it should not surprise you to know that weathercasters rarely prepare weather forecasts. There are staff meteorologists for that. The on-air weatherperson is expected to draw audiences, not weather maps.

Feature reporters usually ply their craft near the "back of the book," close by the weather. They keep the mood light and try to leave the viewer with a smile. The subject matter of some feature vignettes is called "evergreen" because it is not supposed to wilt with the passage of time. It can be stored until needed. (Two of the best practitioners of "evergreen art" were Charles Kuralt and Andy Rooney.) Locally, you usually see evergreen reports on slow news days, when the editor has trouble filling the news budget (the newsworthy events of the day). But as entertaining news becomes more of a commodity, feature reports are being used more and more to attract and hold audiences through the news program.

No news family would be complete without a science reporter, a Dr. Wizard, who usually wears glasses, may have an advanced degree, and is certainly gray around the temples. These experts bring to the audience the latest in everything from cancer research to the designer disease of the year. Some with the title "Dr." may actually be MDs, but don't count on it.

Once the family has gathered, everyone in place and with a specific role, the show is ready to begin. The anchor reads the lead story. If you are expecting to hear the most important news on any given day, you will often be disappointed. Never forget that the program's producer is trying to grab you before you zap away to another news show. Therefore,

chances are you will hear a tease about a story such as Paris Hilton's visit to jail, Pamela Anderson's home videos, happenings in the British royal family, or news of a Beyoncé tour. Those stories have glitter and glamour in today's journalism. And if glitter and glamour won't do the job, gore will. Body bags have become an important currency in TV news, and a four-bagger is a grand slam.

An all-important attraction to a news show is called a "get"; that is, when a newsperson can line up a headliner who will attract an audience. For example, the *New York Times*'s Jim Rutenberg reported in 2003, when rescued POW Jessica Lynch was going to give her first interview after returning from Iraq, that CBS News offered her a two-hour documentary with CBS News, a TV movie with CBS Entertainment, the chance to cohost a special on MTV, and a book deal with Simon & Schuster. Need we tell you that CBS, MTV, and Simon & Schuster are all owned by Viacom? Diane Sawyer got this "get" and interviewed Jessica Lynch first on TV. When famous croc hunter Steve Irwin died in 2006, published reports said ABC News coughed up $1 million or more for an interview with his widow by Barbara Walters and a "licensing fee" for footage of the daredevil who was killed by a stingray. ABC News insisted it did not pay for the interview, but a source at NBC News said it dropped out of the bidding when the price became "insane." Reports say that NBC once offered singer Michael Jackson $5 million for an interview and other footage, with the promise of postponing a tough *Dateline NBC* report on him. That deal fell through. A 2001 inside.com story ranked Monica Lewinsky's first television interview as the biggest get of all time.

If viewers have stayed through the lead story, they probably will be hooked for a while because the newscast is designed to keep their attention through the commercial breaks into

the next section, when the process starts again. Taped stories from reporters are peppered throughout the show to keep interest from flagging as anchors keep the program on track, "eyeballing," or reading, stories on camera. When the news stories thin out, there are sports, features, and weather to fill up the time.

All this is presented with slick lighting and production values, moving along at a crisp pace. The tempo is usually fast since some programmers believe that fast-paced news programs attract younger audiences. Older audiences, they believe, are attracted to a slower-paced, quieter presentation. As such, trying to simulate the experience of the banner-ad-plastered Internet, some news shows are cluttering their screens with information. The *New York Times* reports, "on CNN, the hyperactive pace of Wolf Blitzer's nightly news show 'The Situation Room' is so extreme that it was parodied on 'Saturday Night Live.' " With one glance at the screen, is it really possible to absorb the United States military strategy in Iraq or that a thunderstorm is moving over the Midwest, the Standard & Poor's index is up 16.95 points, and Sean Combs has separated from his girlfriend? No matter how cluttered or fast or slow the pace of the show, there is not much time to present anything but truncated information. For his weekly *Tyndall Report*, news analyst Andrew Tyndall analyzed the content of the first night of *CBS Evening News with Katie Couric*. He says the program averaged about 8.1 minutes of hard news and 10.9 minutes of features, interviews, and commentary: about 19 minutes of content. On average, the nightly half-hour network newscasts contain seven taped news packages (as a complete recorded story is known). And that's almost 85 percent of the time spent filling the news hole. According to the annual "State of the News Media" report, at the local level viewers get "a lot of local weather, traffic, and crime. As for

other news of the day—local or national—usually just three or four items received anything more than a brief anchor report with taped sound." And, of course, more time must be subtracted if there's "happy talk" on the set. Tyndall figures that morning shows average 42.5 minutes of news each hour.

Given the limited time and objectives of a television newscast, the viewer has to realize that he or she is not getting a full meal but rather a snack. And depending on the organization presenting the news, that snack may contain plenty of empty calories.