

THE RISE OF 24-HOUR NEWS TELEVISION

Global Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS 24-HOUR NEWS TELEVISION?

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Ten years into the new millennium, rolling news coverage is increasingly found in public spaces—on mobile phones, double-decker buses, public libraries, work environments, doctors’ waiting rooms, gym floors, shopping malls, hotel bars, and airport lounges—a permanent and immediate backdrop to what is happening in the world. Even if most passers by are oblivious to what is happening in these ‘windows on the world,’ the public are symbolically connected to what Marshall McLuhan (1964) would call a “Global Village.” Much like the availability of free newspapers left in empty bus seats or commuter train carriages, 24-hour news channels appear an increasingly inescapable part of the contemporary landscape, visual wallpaper to accompany people in their daily routines.

News channels, nevertheless, have a relatively short life span. June 2010 marked the 30th anniversary of Cable News Network (CNN), the first dedicated, round-the-clock American 24-hour television news channel. This edited volume is an attempt to capture how the 24-hour television news genre has evolved since then. It charts the rise of 24-hour news and assesses the character and nature of rolling news coverage produced by a growing army of dedicated news stations.

Delivering news 24-hours a day, of course, is nothing new to the culture

of journalism. After all, while CNN might have been the first dedicated 24-hour news television channel, journalists have always had to work under pressure to meet looming deadlines with time or spatial constraints. The fast-paced 24/7 news culture is captured in the classic ethnographies of Tuchman (1978) or Gans (1979) where snapshot decisions are made against complaints of lack of time or editorial pleas for more space. As Gans (*ibid.*: 82) writes, “Lack of time and staff also require the use of quickly and easily applied methods of empirical enquiry, and limited air time and magazine space restrict the number of findings that can be presented.” In other words, journalism is shaped by the resources available to news organizations, adapting and innovating over time to overcome new and more challenging environments (Rantanen, 2009).

But if the availability of international news channels now seems a familiar part of multi-channel television, their impact on the broadcasting ecology of news-making continues to influence the culture of journalism. As Pelton (2004: 3) writes, “Communication satellites have...made our world global, interconnected, and interdependent....satellites are a global agent of change in an incredible range of ways.” While some of these developments may not be celebrated, they have nevertheless acted as important agents—before the rise of the Internet in the 1990s—in shaping a new globally accessible, live, real-time genre of television news. Where once news about war—or peace—may have taken several days to travel from country to country, rolling news stations now deliver news almost immediately and from any remote location with access to cable or satellite communication. Satellite television has thus contributed to making the world more globalized and mediated, redefining our expectations of time, space, and sense of location (Thompson, 1995).

While 24/7 deadlines have always played a part in news construction and selection, many high-ranking public officials have argued that the rolling news medium has adversely influenced the way democratic institutions function. Politicians, in particular, are caught up in the relentless drama of 24-hour news culture, frantically trying to keep pace with the demands of real-time television news. Former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, for example, used one of his final speeches to warn of the dangers posed by a 24-hour news democracy: “In the 1960s, the government would sometimes, on a serious issue, have a Cabinet lasting two days. It would be laughable to think you could do that now without the heavens falling in before lunch on the first day. Things harden within minutes. I mean, you can’t let speculation stay out there for longer than an instant.” Just months into his office, the American President Barack Obama similarly complained of how a rolling news mentality can encourage short-term

political decision making: “Too many in Washington put off hard decisions for some other time on some other day...an impatience that characterizes this town—an attention span that has only grown shorter with the 24-hour news cycle...When a crisis hits, there’s all too often a lurch from shock to trance, with everyone responding to the tempest of the moment until the furor has died away and the media coverage has moved on, instead of confronting the major challenges that will shape our future in a sustained and focused way.”

If this says more about a politician’s desire to control the news agenda, their views are echoed by some broadcast journalists. Jeremy Paxman (2007) in the UK has questioned “whether there’s enough going on in Britain to sustain these channels [24-hour news channels] at the level of portentous immediacy they require...But in the very crowded world in which television lives, it won’t do to whisper, natter, cogitate, or muse. You have to shout. The need is for constant sensation. The consequence is that reporting now prizes emotion over much else.” American journalists Howard Rosenberg and Charles Feldman (2008) parallel the speed of the 24-hour news cycle with the frenetic pace of modern life. The desire for immediate news is much like the desire for “drinking instant coffee while listening to instant analysis of instant polls. It includes not only speed dialing and speed reading, but speedier dialing and speedier reading, living life by a stopwatch, cramming and more into less and less. We want faster food and faster orgasms” (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008: 18). This suggests rolling news has become part of consumer culture, a quick-fix stop for viewers ‘on the move.’ But while 24-hour news channels might be convenient for catching routine updates, the speed of news consumption, Rosenberg and Feldman (ibid.) conclude, is hardly conducive to learning about what is happening in the world.

From these perspectives, rolling news channels are an impatient form of communication, a medium where elected officials are expected to hastily respond to events while journalists are asked to (over)react live on air to news with limited time to explain *why* and *what* they are currently reporting (cf. Harrison, 2000; MacGregor, 1997). At the same time, continuous news allows the world to unravel in real-time pictures. As Rosenberg and Feldman (2008: 13) explain “beaming events to the multitudes as they happen is indispensable on occasion. Live cameras are peerless when covering some kinds of breaking stories, from massive shootouts and volatile civil disturbances to raging wildfires, devastating natural disasters, and truly epic catastrophes like the terrorism of 9/11.” While the vast majority of rolling coverage may be more mundane, when an event does unfold, the medium of 24-hour news is set up to immedi-

ately make sense of the action. In addition, 24-hour news channels have played a key public service role in recent years. When a serious accident or a terrorist attack has occurred, rolling news channels have proved regular sources of information, constantly updating available information to viewers concerned about locating relatives and friends. In moments of high drama, according to the former head of Sky News in the UK, Nick Pollard (2009), 24-hour news channels feed “the public’s hunger to know what’s going on in their world, to absorb well-informed opinion and explanation about it, and to have their own say as well.”

For better or worse, 24-hour news television channels have made their mark on the journalism industry. In the process, they appear to have influenced the way elected officials go about their business and perhaps even altered what audiences expect from broadcast news. But while journalists and politicians have raised many questions about the role rolling news channels play in journalism and to democracy more generally, scholarly endeavors into the genre have been somewhat limited in scope and focus.

There have, of course, been periods of time when 24-hour news has been under the academic radar, most notably around the emergence of CNN as a global hegemonic force (Livingston, 1997; Robinson, 2002, 2005; Volkmer, 1999). And since the Middle Eastern rolling news station Al Jazeera gained notoriety in its live reporting of the war in Afghanistan—much like CNN during the first Gulf War—there have been pockets of scholarly material on rolling news exploring, in particular, its impact on military conflicts (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003; Miles, 2005; Thussu & Freedman, 2003; Zayani, 2005). But beyond that, the discussion of 24-hour news as a genre *more generally* has often been consigned to either introductory chapter-length endeavors in undergraduate media textbooks (McNair, 2009) or, conversely, been somewhat fragmented with articles often hidden away in a wide range of communication- or journalism-related journals. This book is an attempt to introduce readers to the world of dedicated 24-hour news channels *as well as* to bring to light some of the latest research available in academic circles from international scholars drawing on a range of methodological tools and theoretical frameworks.

Introducing the Scope of the Book

The book deals with several regions around the world, such as the Middle East and South America, and examines individual countries, including Australia,

Britain, China, Finland, France, Germany, India, and the United States. The 17 chapters broadly address what rolling news channels have brought to the culture and practice of journalism and news-making, what influence they have had on the consumption and expectations of news audiences, and, most significantly, what democratic purpose they serve. The aim, overall, is to explore the global impact of 24-hour news television channels from a range of international perspectives.

Given the global rise of 24-hour news channels in recent years, this volume could not possibly claim to represent a complete picture of rolling news channels or 24-hour television news culture. As Mugdha Rai and Simon Cottle's research in Chapter 3 demonstrates, there are hundreds of 24-hour news channels and while some (such as the ITV news channel in the UK) have subsequently closed, the numbers are still growing (with some even launching sister English versions such as Al Jazeera English in 2006 and France 24, which, for part of its schedule at least, broadcasts in French, English, and Arabic). Contributions have been sought from key regions and markets around the globe. John Jirik in Chapter 15, for example, examines the political tensions between China Central Television (CCTV) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), and whether this impacts on its domestic and international news agenda. Meanwhile, Claudia Boyd-Barrett and Oliver Boyd-Barrett in Chapter 11 carry out a content study to ascertain how independent three 24-hour news channels in South America are from US commercial and political interests.

The book is divided into four parts. The first four chapters provide a history and context to 24-hour television news channels. In Chapter 1, Stephen Cushion suggests there are three overlapping phases in the evolution of 24-hour television. First, a 'coming of age' stage when CNN was launched and grew in recognition, most notably in its live reporting of the first Gulf War. This triggered the arrival of other channels with similar ambitions. As the availability and penetration of cable or satellite services grew post-Gulf War, the second age is characterized as a race for transnational reach and influence. The last overlapping and ongoing age, Cushion argues, marks a stage when news channels began to scale down aspirations of reach, with a proliferation in national news stations prompting an unprecedented era of competition between rival news channels. He concludes that while news channels appear to have become more regionalized, there remain globally binding forces that work against the delivery of local news content. And in this more crowded rolling news environment, the competition has arguably encouraged more market-led news conventions, most notably the rise of breaking news.

Drawing on debates around the ‘Foxification’ and ‘tabloidization’ of news content, Michael Bromley (Chapter 2) traces the evolution of 24-hour news television from a different perspective. Comparing the rise and prominence of screen-based 24/7 news channels to more conventional forms of news media, Bromley argues against the proposition that rolling news channels are single-handedly responsible for any perceived visual or tabloid shift in broadcast journalism. He sees the visual primacy of the 24-hour news medium as an extension of rather than a radical departure from existing forms of news, including terrestrial television and newspapers. The form and style of 24-hour news journalism reflects what audiences have become accustomed to from generation to generation. What this suggests, in other words, is that more attention should be paid to the agency of evolving audience expectations rather than a reliance on a technological explanation for the impact of live, rolling news coverage.

Mugdha Rai and Simon Cottle in Chapter 3 provide a systematic mapping of 24-hour news channels right around the globe. They suggest positions such as ‘global dominance’ and ‘global public sphere’—or, put another way, the ‘CNN effect’—have become theoretically complex since more national and local rolling stations have pluralized the 24-hour news scene. They conclude by arguing that where once the transnational reach of global channels monopolized the airwaves, “the expression of contending and alternative views, values and world visions” are more difficult to sustain when the multi-channel news age offers not only localized or regionalized rolling coverage, but a choice of nationalized and internationalized 24-hour news channels. This point is empirically examined by Claudia Boyd-Barrett and Oliver Boyd-Barrett in Chapter 11.

The final chapter in this section is concerned with the overall democratic purpose of rolling news coverage. Justin Lewis (Chapter 4) suggests that dedicated 24-hour news channels have always had the potential to overcome the brevity of existing news culture, to exploit the time and space available to them to investigate and communicate effectively what is happening in the world. Instead, he argues, rolling news is constrained by a set of news values and conventions driven by commercial broadcasters. As a result, rolling news has been shaped by the values of consumer culture. And part of this means delivering news with “built-in obsolescence” to ensure viewers remain tuned into the next update or breaking news story. Lewis suggests that “disposable news reaches its apotheosis in the repetitive rush of the 24-hour news cycle,” and that it is commercial imperatives—rather than the technology—that constrain 24-hour

news.

The next section develops this line of argument by exploring some of the reasons for and the implications of the increase in live news and the competition this sparks to break news first.

Chris Paterson in Chapter 5 shows how international news agencies are, under the radar, feeding the supply of live material used by rolling news stations all around the globe. With limited resources, he argues, many 24-hour news channels are increasingly turning to this raw material as a means of being able to claim to ‘cover the world.’ While the instinct to go live makes commercial sense, he suggests it is changing the nature of news values and discouraging “more contextualized, deeper, and broader reporting by broadcasters.” The autonomy for news channels to deliver their own distinctive news agenda is thus restricted by live, rolling news material supplied elsewhere (cf. Garcia-Blanco & Cushion, 2010).

In tracing the history of Sky News and the BBC News channel’s competitive relationship in the UK, Stephen Cushion in Chapter 6 suggests that “the race to be Britain’s most watched news channel” has promoted not only a rise in the reporting of breaking news items, but an editorial shift in the reporting of live action. In a bid to be more competitive with Sky, he suggests that the BBC channel relaxed its editorial guidelines to allow anchors and reporters to be more speculative in moments of high drama labeled ‘breaking news.’ The rolling news effect, he concludes, has moved journalism from the conveyance of factual information to the delivery of live, breaking pictures.

While many 24-hour news television stations appear to think live news will appeal to news watchers, C. A. Tuggle, Peter A. Casella, and Suzanne Huffman in Chapter 7 suggest this is perhaps overstated. Drawing on an audience study of news viewers in America, they show that many “disdain unnecessary live reporting—especially black hole reports.” Respondents, however, did appreciate the necessity of live news during breaking news stories. Broadcasters, the authors conclude, might want to consider being more selective when deciding what—and what not—to report from a live perspective.

John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson in Chapter 8 develop this point when they argue that while a dedicated sports channel might have raised the game of, say, football journalism, it has instead encouraged a form of tabloid news where we learn less about the power that informs football decision making—the politics involved in bidding for the World Cup, perhaps—and more about celebrity gossip.

The final chapter in this section explores breaking culture on online news.

According to Laura Juntunen in Chapter 9, the competitive environment to break news first has, amongst Finnish journalists, compromised ethical standards of reporting. Juntunen draws on interviews with 35 journalists about their role in the reporting of Finnish school shootings in 2007 and 2008. Overall, she concludes, values of speed superseded ethical concerns about accuracy.

Section 3 moves the focus from conventions used in the reporting of 24-hour news drama to the reach and influence of rolling news stations. The four chapters in this section examine the rise of news channels in Australia, South America, and the Middle East and ask how the emergence of 24-hour news television has impacted not only on broadcast journalism but on the broader democratic and political culture of these regions.

Mohamed Zayani in Chapter 10 explores the changing characteristics of news media in the Arab world. He argues that news channels such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya have had a transformative effect on Arab journalism and could potentially act as democratizing agents for the region. Other stations have since been launched and helped to develop a more deliberative culture with channels eager to reflect the concerns and anxieties of Arab public opinion. While Zayani argues this has promoted a more participatory political culture, it has yet to meaningfully develop a more substantive democratic system of governance within the Middle East.

In Chapter 11, Claudia Boyd-Barrett and Oliver Boyd-Barrett ask to what extent commercial and political interests shape the editorial agendas of news channels in Latin America. Drawing on a content analysis, they show that half of CNNEsp, a US spin-off channel, is filled with content of US origin while the other half is soft Latin American infotainment. Meanwhile, NTN24 covers a larger swathe of Latin American issues, but remains constrained by the channel's business model and the commercial impact it might cause in America. Even TeleSUR, a channel the authors call counter-hegemonic, favored US political and economic interests (e.g., covering a possible coup in Honduras) over more slippery diplomatic situations (e.g., glossing over government oppression of protestors during the 2009 protests in Iran). What this suggests, overall, is that while 24-hour news channels appear more local in scope, they remain tied to larger corporate influences not editorially consistent with the region's own politics or reflective of public opinion.

When a news channel has more editorial autonomy with the resources on the ground to cover ongoing events, Muhammad I. Ayish shows in Chapter 12 how rolling stations can produce a more localized perspective on issues. Employing a frame analysis of Al Jazeera's coverage of the conflict in Gaza, his

findings suggest Palestinians were covered in a far more humanitarian light than they were on other international channels. This was partly a result of the access Al Jazeera had to the human suffering of the conflict. Ayish concludes that journalists applied both moral and political judgments when reporting the conflict while at the same time maintaining consistency with professional standards.

The final chapter in this section deals with a part of the world with limited access to 24-hour news television. Australia launched its first national channel—Sky News—in 1996. Sally Young in Chapter 13 argues that while Australia may be a relative newcomer to the genre of 24-hour news, Sky's near monopoly has made it highly influential amongst opinion leaders, political elites, and other journalists. In doing so, Sky has “had a major impact on news cycles, journalism practice, and political campaigning.” The 24-hour news medium, she concludes, has reshaped the style of reporting on other network news channels, but she suggests this influence may be lessening as viewers increasingly go online to a range of sources to find immediate news.

One of the notable features of 24-hour news channels is that their development has not been driven purely by commercial imperatives. Indeed, in many countries 24-hour news channels are expensive ventures with audiences too small to pull in sufficient revenue. Their growth has thus been driven by a number of factors to do with corporate/national ideology and prestige. Section 4 explores this point, focusing on the political and editorial agendas of four national news channels, and, more generally, on the political economy of 24-hour news in various national contexts. The four chapters deal with significant global markets—France, China, India, and Germany—and each demonstrates how the political, economic, and social factors unique to a country can help shape the type and purpose of rolling news channels that emerge.

In Chapter 14, Raymond Kuhn argues that the development of France 24 was partly informed by dissatisfaction amongst the political class in France with how the country is portrayed in the media. With the French government reluctant to sanction a UN resolution in the run-up to the war in Iraq, Kuhn suggests other international news channels, most notably in the US, were marginalizing or even ridiculing French diplomacy. While it was in competition with existing domestic rolling stations, France 24 appeared to be launched to project France on the world stage rather than capture the national market. Its news agenda, Kuhn concludes, is primarily framed through the lens of French relevance and priorities even if this is restricted by resources and a reliance on international news agencies for video footage.

Like France 24, the development of CCTV in China is closely tied to political interventions, in this case the ruling Communist Party, the People's Republic of China (PRC). Drawing on the relatively short history of CCTV's domestic and international news channels, John Jirik in Chapter 15 explores the launch of each channel and, more specifically, to what extent political censorship has been enforced. Jirik argues that while the PRC might be reluctant to relinquish editorial control, market forces dictate that CCTV journalists have some agency in pursuing their own news agenda. The PRC, in this respect, is wary of sacrificing the significant advertising revenues generated by CCTV. And, Jirik concludes, an explicitly pro-government-spun news channel may result in turning viewers off.

By contrast, Carsten Reinemann and Nayla Fawzi in Chapter 16 suggest German TV news channels have been largely shaped by market forces. They argue that because neither of the most popular news channels, n-tv and N24, has managed to become a profitable business venture this has informed the nature of their 24-hour news agendas. So, for example, both channels target elite viewers rather than the wider public. And because neither channel has the journalistic resources to sustain a rolling news format, 24/7 news is primarily limited to the mornings. Reinemann and Fawzi conclude that these German 24-hour news channels have "become almost like documentary channels" rather than a round-the-clock, rolling news service typically associated with the 24-hour news genre.

The final chapter paints a more positive picture of how 24-hour channels have evolved. Nalin Mehta in Chapter 17 examines the growth of private Indian news channels and the impact they have had on democratic culture. Mehta argues that since state control was loosened and the first privately funded news channel was launched in 1998, Indian news culture has been transformed. By 2009, he suggests, more than 400 satellite channels were available in India and more than 70 news channels existed in 11 languages. Even if some news channels remain profit-driven and the state-controlled channels remain influenced by ruling governments, he concludes that a TV news revolution has emerged in India, which "has opened up avenues that previously did not exist and brought many more people into the public arena."

This final chapter, much like the book as a whole, invites us to explore the diverse ways in which 24-hour news channels have reshaped the genre of news and the impact they have had on democracy more generally. It also reminds us that although the dominant story told by the contributions in this volume concern the limits and disappointments of 24-hour news, such channels have

enormous democratic potential, and provide the possibility of enhancing the quality and reach of information in a democratic—or undemocratic—society.

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