

DELIVERY FOR THE NEW MEDIA

By Dave Cupp, M.A. & Ann S. Utterback, Ph.D.

Much has been written about the new and varied media platforms journalists are now asked to master, but one area that has not been explored is what *delivery style* works best on these new devices. This question is an important one because history shows us that new media platforms have triggered profound change in television news including delivery styles.

When cable television showed signs of expanding in 1978, *Newsweek* cautioned that it would make “the tube as we know it...as obsolete as the Victrola” (Bliss, Now the News, 1991). This same prediction has been made about the expansion of television news onto the Internet and to new electronic devices such as the BlackBerry and the cell phone. The Internet is in the process of transforming electronic journalism as we have known it. Allan Horlick, President and GM of WUSA in Washington, puts it this way:

Over the next few years, we’re going to see a blurring of the TV and the computer and the mobile devices....We’ve got to be able to deliver information over multiple devices.... We’re not just talking about a different kind of TV news. We’re talking about a cultural revolution in the information business” (“Tonight’s Big Story: News Viewers Missing!” *The Washington Post*, 6/3/07).

How is this revolution going so far? A visit to network and local affiliate websites, reveals mostly repurposed news programs airing on the web. It's difficult to find news programming created specifically for Internet distribution. Conversely, most news programs on television actually steal content from the Internet by showing web pages, Twitter exchanges, and You Tube videos during newscasts. Producers seem to realize that Internet news has a new style of communication, but they fail to implement any style changes when they move broadcast content to the Internet.

With You Tube videos getting millions of viewings every day, television news is competing with a new type of information provider. It's more immediate, and the presentation makes today's television news look formal and outdated. Three words to keep in mind in describing the most effective delivery for the Internet are casual, comfortable and connected. What is needed is a new style that breaks out of the traditional format of evening news programs and provides both the immediacy and the casualness that are hallmarks of the Internet.

In order to better understand the shift that needs to take place, let's review the technological advances that have occurred in broadcasting and the evolution of delivery styles.

When television and radio news gained popularity in the 1940's and 1950's, the broadcasts were heard and later seen on a piece of furniture that was often the center of attention in a family's living room. Many televisions were housed in an elaborate cabinet with doors that closed to hide the screen when not in use. Viewers sat well back from the screen when viewing the television. Radio consoles were also furniture in the early days, and they too became a focal point of an entire room of the house.

The broadcasting style of this era was "announcing" so it was fitting that the voices came through large, elaborate pieces of furniture. Broadcasters were often hired because of their booming voices that gave an aura of authority and dignity to the broadcast. These on-air voices were usually somewhat different from the speaker's normal voice with enhanced resonance and projection. Whether on radio or television, these broadcasters sounded like they were speaking from a stage behind a lectern or from an elaborate anchor desk.

Michael Freedman, former Managing Editor for the Broadcast Division of United Press International, related an example of the image listeners had of broadcasters in the early days. He told a story of how the UPI newscast always opened with a deep, booming voice that said,

“From the World Desk of United Press International....” Whenever anyone was in the UPI building to visit, they always wanted to see the “World Desk” where they imagined the news was delivered. Bill Ferguson, a veteran UPI executive, had to have an anchor desk set built that was the “World Desk” to fulfill visitors’ desires to see the acclaimed site even though the news was actually delivered in a sound booth. (Utterback, [Broadcast Voice Handbook](#), First Edition, 1990, Fourth Edition, 2005).

Listeners wanted to see the pomp and circumstance they imagined when they heard the news on UPI. Surely voices as grand as the ones they heard came from a grand setting.

Announcers during this era were viewed as being different from the ordinary person. Indeed, the deep, rich, authoritative voices of many radio and early television anchors led that period to be remembered as the era of “Voice of God” newscasters.

The first great television anchor was [Walter Cronkite](#), widely viewed as “The Most Trusted Man in America.” President Johnson even commented about the Vietnam War that if he had lost Cronkite’s support, he had lost the American public. News in this era was delivered as if it were a formal speech being given by an esteemed person on a stage behind a lectern.

Why did this first era of broadcasting pass away? The first big change, which demonstrated the power of personality to enliven newscasts and attract viewers, came in NBC's inspired pairing of [Chet Huntley and David Brinkley](#) in 1956. Huntley was a straight-arrow newsman with straightforward delivery. He came across as solid and sometimes even somber. By contrast Brinkley was witty and irreverent, providing a breath of broadcasting fresh air. The balance between the two was perfect, and the pairing created ratings magic.

Local broadcasters and consultants took note, and two subsequent developments sounded the death knell for the old style of broadcast announcing. First came the concept of "Eyewitness News" in the mid-1960's and a few years later, "Action News" was coined to compete with stations using the former concept. One of the ideas behind both was to "humanize" the news program. This was the era that started "happy talk" or "anchor chat" at the news desk. Suddenly, anchors were not the esteemed authorities of the past. Instead they were the friendly people who delivered the news. With the development of Electronic News Gathering (ENG) in the mid-1970's, live shots from reporters became a major component of the news. Now anchors and reporters could talk to each other. Live shots gave immediacy to the news. Viewers now had

someone who could be their eyes and ears at events that were taking place in real time.

The broadcast delivery of this era stepped out from behind the lectern of the past era. Now broadcasters were walking around on that stage and moving closer to the audience. They were pointing out things to viewers in live remotes and talking like the friend next door. *Enlarged Conversation* is a phrase coined for this style of delivery (Utterback, [Broadcast Voice Handbook](#), First Edition, 1990, Fourth Edition, 2005).

In both television and radio, “Happy Talk” worked as a technique to make anchors seem more accessible to the listener. Its purpose was to humanize broadcasters so that listeners could relate to them. Focus groups and consultants were brought in to gauge how well this was working. Broadcasters who held onto the old-style of announcing found their voicing being criticized or even ridiculed by sitcom characters like Ted Baxter on *The Mary Tyler Moore* show and Jim Dial on *Murphy Brown*, and movies such as *Broadcast News*.

And it was not just the delivery of the message that had changed by the 1970’s. Radios and televisions had changed as well. This new delivery was being heard not on large, elaborate pieces of furniture like the early sets, but on small screen televisions or radios that were now

portable. TV's and radios could be moved around from room to room and could be placed closer to each individual audience member. Looking at the difference between the early era of broadcasting and the second era, it is easy to see that the actual spatial distance between the radio or television and the listener affected the delivery styles. The reasons why this is true have actually been measured scientifically.

Anthropologist, Edward T. Hall, studied spatial relationships. He describes four zones that Americans use when relating to each other. Hall's four zones are: Public (from twelve feet to the limits of visibility), Social-Consultative (from four to twelve feet), Casual-Personal (from one and a half feet to four feet), and Intimate (from actual physical contact to eighteen inches) (Hall, The Silent Language, 1959).

In the beginning when delivery style was formal and news was announced with a tone of formality, the television or radio was positioned across the room at a Social-Consultative distance. When the equipment became portable, it could be on a nightstand or desk or even on a swivel arm in a hospital. This moved it to the Casual-Personal distance. The delivery became more casual and personal as well. As the proximity of the radio or television set changed, so did the delivery.

The era that began around 1970 continues until today on television and radio. Interestingly, the small portable televisions are morphing into mega, flat screens in home theaters, but the news delivery style is still based in the early transition of the 1970's.

Now broadcast delivery needs to change once again as the use of such handheld devices as the BlackBerry, the cell phone, and the laptop computer moves the newscasters bringing us information within the intimate zone of actual touch to eighteen inches. We are no longer captives in our homes or offices when we watch television. Now we hold the news in the palm of our hand and watch it anywhere. The use of headphones increases the intimacy (Wenger & Potter, [Advancing the Story](#), 2008). What once was announced from across the room is now inside our heads. To be effective in this era, newscasters need to discard the lectern, step down off the stage and mingle on the same level with their listeners. Just as "announcing" didn't make a smooth transition into the more conversational "Eyewitness News style," the delivery we hear today in television news isn't making a comfortable transition to the new electronic platforms.

So what delivery will work for the new platforms? One of the pioneers in Internet political coverage on You Tube, [James Kotecki](#), puts it this way:

The most important thing... to relay a good image to You Tube viewers is just to relax and not treat this like ...an appearance on a place like Fox News.... just learn that low production values can be a very positive thing as long as they're relaxed and they're talking directly to the camera and responding directly to You Tube viewers and relating to them as human beings.... ("Fox and Friends," 3/31/07)

So we can take a cue from You Tube. Viewers want a delivery that feels as if the person telling them the news is having a latte with them at Starbucks. They are, after all, often holding that person in their hand as they watch on their iPhone or BlackBerry. It's not *Enlarged Conversation* any longer and the idea of standing behind a lectern on a stage and pontificating the news is surely out of date. Today's delivery needs to have the feel of a two-way conversation. Call it *Connected Chatting*. It should be casual and comfortable. It should sound more like a television live shot and less like a TelePrompter being read. This delivery still must be clear and understandable, however, and it cannot be sloppy or totally ad lib. There need to be filters in the speaker's head that filter out inappropriate language or verbal fillers (e.g., "uh," "okay," "like"), but rather than sounding like a script being read, it should sound like a casual chat.

To succeed, we need to do more than simply transfer current television news products onto the Internet without any thought to the delivery style being used. The things that make broadcast delivery work on television are not the same things that will make it work on the Web. Archived news broadcasts certainly serve a purpose; but they lack the light personal touch that is expected in this era of Facebook, Twitter and webcasts.

It's always easier to hold onto the old style of announcing, but just as the booming voices of the 1950's did not work on the Eyewitness News style of the 1970's, that style is not making an easy transition to the 2000's. You Tube with its viral videos is showing us what works.

Journalists have much to offer as ethical, educated reporters of the news, but if they are to be heard, they must change their delivery style to meet the times. Reed Hundt, former chairman of the FCC, believes broadcasters aren't changing fast enough. Hundt says, "...the lesson for broadcasters is the same one that the nation's troubled newspapers and auto companies are learning: Failing to innovate and capitalize on changing markets isn't just a lost opportunity—it can be a death sentence" ("Broadcast TV Never Converted Its Digital Dream," *The Washington Post*, 6/10, 2009).