



NEWS FROM NOWHERE

Night Noise

One of my favourite TV shows is a particularly vacuous all night news program called *News Overnight*. Actually, the show is called the *NBC Today Show* in America, but an Australian network picks it up and broadcasts it live via satellite so that you can enjoy the light of a different day through the TV window with your insomnia. Staring at the screen late at night, I sometimes think *News Overnight* is archetypal television.

Like many people of a generation which grew up when television not only existed but was fully established, it has always been taken for granted, part of my domestic life. You don't watch television, it just happens. It's on while you're there, a vague and ever-present murmur of the public sphere.

So it is a matter of no particular significance that the white noise of television should choose to enter my private space in the form of *News Overnight*. The show has a particularly avuncular weather reader called Willard Scott, and it's quite a spectacle watching this rather jolly man describe the weather on a continent that isn't yours on a day which for Australians has already come and gone. The height of useless information, one might think.

There is a point in the weathercasting when Willard utters the same invariant phrase: "Now here's what's happening in your world!" This appears to be the cue for local stations

throughout the network to insert a little mini-weather broadcast, and the Australian network dutifully does the same, snapping back from the global to the national scale with a clash of accents.

"Now here's what's happening in your world" strikes me as a particularly resonant expression, and many's the time, while all this useless information about another time and place has come pouring into my room, that I've tried to fathom its greater significance, while anticipating Willard's inevitable performance of this line. It seems to encapsulate everything both fascinating and frightening about a global information system. So let's pull Willard's famous line apart and see what this piece of otherwise useless information is telling us about the way global information works.

It starts with the word "Now...": someone on the other side of the world is speaking to me from thousands of miles away, yet only a matter of seconds separates us in time.

"Now here is ...": Willard's voice speaks this global network's essential power. The power to present things, to name them and tell stories about the things it presents and names, like "show and tell".

"Now here is what is happening...": Above all, this medium presents events. Its concept of time is the time of the event, but the event is presented as discrete segments. It is the opposite of that kind of philosophical time which knows no urgency, which does not know of television's injunction to name, narrate and present something as it happens, before it ends, before the last residue of the event disappears without a trace.

"Now here's what's happening in your...": despite its global conception of itself and its instantaneous control of time, this medium insists on being part of something private, something belonging to me and me alone, the little private world where I lie on the edge of the bed staring blankly at the screen. In this private, separate, isolated world, what do I care who else is watching, or where? It speaks to me in my home, it speaks across whole oceans and continents, yet Willard speaks in a casual, friendly voice, as if he were actually here in this little private world. There is a

one-way street running from the world straight to me.

"...world": there is no private space here any more. The world keeps leaping out of a box at the end of my bed and explaining itself to me. This world is mine, and I am its. Time for a commercial break.

The reason for attempting to unpack the baggage Willard Scott is carrying when he pops into my home for a chat is to try to understand what is happening in a world which, among the many things which appear to be in flux and change, is increasingly subjected to global information flows. "All that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profane" is the way Marx described the dynamism and changeability of the modern world. Grasping how contemporary media are changing both the world itself and our experience of the world (and these are not entirely the same thing) is what this column is all about. A recent example might help illustrate the weird kind of things that seem to be happening.

Another sleepless night, absentmindedly flipping from channel to channel in the 'neo-TV' manner described by Umberto Eco: "Have you ever tried watching TV news on two state channels, switching in hiccup fashion from one to the other so that you always see the same item of TV news twice, and never the one you are waiting for? Or brought in a 'pie in the face' at the moment when the old mother is dying?" If you haven't you should try it; it's fun!

The only trouble was, I kept flipping channels and getting exactly the same picture. Strange. Turning the sound up revealed that the pictures I was watching of waiting crowds and lines of police were courtesy of South African National Television. They were pictures of the crowds awaiting the release of Nelson Mandela, legendary figurehead and leader of the African National Congress.

Yet there were several very strange aspects to this event. South African TV had a monopoly on the image flow out of South Africa, so everybody in the world was obliged to carry the same pictures, as the TV voice-over announcers very apologetically reminded us, as if to say, "don't blame us for the coverage". And well we might. The images were terrible! All of a sudden

the camera would start making whip pans left and right as the camera operator did a few warm-up exercises. The voice-over announcer explained that the image wasn't at that point being broadcast within South Africa. South African TV seemed oblivious to the fact that, while their viewers were still chewing over a soap opera episode or whatever, the rest of the world was already getting the satellite feed.

This, to me, seemed to indicate a lack of media sophistication on the part of the South African regime. Here was a perfect opportunity to make propaganda on a global scale: Mandela's release made the government look good, it gave various vested interests a pretext to begin lobbying for the lifting of sanctions, but these images made them look like a bunch of inward-looking hicks with no concept of global media image-politics. Perhaps we should be thankful. Sure enough, Mandela's actual release was delayed for so long that the live coverage was forced to conclude without a climax.

As I flipped between channels looking at the same shoddy pictures I began to notice that one of the voice-overs was English, the other

American. Not that this is unusual in Australian television, but closer attention revealed something quite fantastic. The ABC was relaying a BBC program on Mandela's release. One of the commercial channels was relaying NBC's Today show. Here was the kicker: by flipping the remote button I was shifting between two versions of the same images that had travelled around the globe in opposite directions to get to me - one from South Africa to London to Sydney, the other from South Africa to New York to Sydney. "Now here's what's happening in your world."

The Mandela mythos was another curious aspect to this. Joshua Meyrowitz has argued that media have made political figures more of an everyday presence, and this has rendered them less heroic in stature, more everyday and human, all too human. One thinks in particular of those figures who could appear to do nothing right: James Callaghan and Jimmy Carter. Or Bob Hawke, currying electoral support for Labor during the bitter Reagan-Thatcher years by playing a 'common bloke' role for the cameras, but becoming so familiar that even his prostate opera-

tion was common knowledge to all and sundry.

Mandela is, of course, a figure in quite a different league. Yet what seems to have made Mandela possible as a great symbol of resistance to apartheid was his very invisibility for so many years. Even his failure to materialise in the scheduled timeslot seemed an appropriate gesture, a continuation of that legendary invisibility. In a desperate attempt to keep their programs alive, both NBC and the BBC replayed over and over the tiny scrap of film of Mandela, and the few still photographs. Minimal clues verifying his existence, but far from enough to render him as every day a visitor in one's living room as Hawke or Thatcher, George Bush or Teddy Kennedy. The Mandela mythos and his invisibility seem to verify as a negative case the Meyrowitz idea of familiarity breeding, not contempt, but sublime indifference. By not happening in our world, Mandela appeared on the day of his release to belong to a better world. To promise a place beyond the spectacle.

McKenzie Wark.

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