2
Television and Time

When weather information is absolutely crucial, count on CNN’s global weather team. Armed with the latest technology, real time weather reports and satellite images from around the planet, why depend on anyone else? CNN’s forecasters draw from an extensive database to help put today’s weather into historical perspective. This means forecasts that are accurate, clear and dependable. And if you can’t tune in, log on to CNN.com/weather for all the information you need at your fingertips. So no matter where you are in the world, the CNN weather team has you covered. When it comes to weather, be prepared, be the first to know.

(CNN, 19 March 2003, commercial broadcast minutes before the Iraq war begins)

Time is at the centre of our understanding of the relationship between television news, television per se, and the culture within which television content is produced. In the weather commercial above, CNN appeals to viewers with reference to different temporalities. It offers ‘real-time’ weather reports, ‘historical perspective’, and ‘forecasts’ of weather to come. Moreover, bringing to bear the present, past, and future upon weather is a service framed as integral to the viewer’s security – enabling them to be informed and prepared, we might infer, for the worst. CNN promises a premediation of potential weather catastrophes, reminding us of the potential for catastrophe while rendering the notion contained by CNN’s own capacity to prepare us. In this chapter, we explore the principles underlying the CNN weather broadcast as they apply to television and television news in particular. We outline the ‘economy of liveness’ underlying television broadcasting. This forms
the basis for a medium-specific alternative to Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge’s (1965) ‘news values’ paradigm which has endured in much media analysis to this day.

In Chapter 1, we argued that the concept ‘modulation of terror’ is important for analysing the nature of the relationship between television news and terror. Through exploring television news’ amplification and containment of terror, we highlighted a contradiction that leaves television’s relation to terror problematic. On the one hand, news practices afford value to the terrible and the catastrophic, the reporting of terror events being in part determined by the passing of certain thresholds in respect of the numbers of injured or dead, and the potential for, as well as actual, death and destruction (see Chapter 6). On the other hand, the presentation of unadulterated horror and boundless threats and the consequential provocation of fear and panic could, if pushed to its limit, alienate viewers and end the television news business. As we have seen, the 9/11 terrorists pushed television towards this latter end of the spectrum and into a new age, not least through the medium’s appropriation or hijacking in what we call the weaponisation of television.

Critical to television’s modulation of terror is its appropriation and mixing of time. Television news seizes and plays with time; it is at the very heart of its capacity to represent and re-represent events, its modes of address, and its mirroring and manipulating of the everyday passage of ‘clock time’.

In later chapters, we develop the role of television news and the significance of time to account for the so-called CNN effect, in the reshaping of the past and its uses to frame the terror present, and in the interplay between the temporal registers of ‘urgency’ and ‘patience’ in democratic decision-making. First, though, we provide an overview of the relevant approaches to time and temporality in media sociology, and the inherent and constructed ‘liveness’ of television news. In keeping with the methodology as outlined in our Introduction, we move in this chapter between the culture within which news is produced, the practices of news production, and examination of news texts.

Flow, liveness, and modulation

The media’s treatment of terror is underpinned by transformations in the temporality and spatiality of television. It is the medium’s construction of contiguity both with events being reported and with audiences that is central to its modulation between the amplification and the