The Irresolution of Television

Television news discourse is in crisis. The technological and textual transformations in twenty-first century television are inseparable from the post-9/11 environment of insecurity. Television’s economy of liveness and visually intensive interaction order is at the centre of new media and security ecologies that have marked the new century. The relationship between television and terror in this period is subject to a process we label ‘media renewal’. This is the process in which television in particular appropriates ‘news content’ and constructs the existence of news as if contingent upon the medium itself. This is not just to say that television news is reflexive in shaping the stories upon which it reports and that the medium remediates (refashions) other media (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) but that it also ‘renews’ itself through its constant discursive self-attention and verbal and graphic self-consciousness. In this way, renewal functions to promote television’s constative (authenticating and validating) presence in the interaction order, continually seeking new parts for itself in the script of the moment. And it is these scripts which are increasingly more adventurous as television seeks to function as author, historian, and prophet, simultaneously transcending and filling time (and place).

The crisis of television news discourse develops from the contradictions in the medium’s destabilising/stabilising regime. Television news chases its tail and then determinedly holds up and scrutinises this same process as a measure of its own success. For instance, Luhmann (2000: 39) argues, ‘The mass media seem simultaneously to nurture and to undermine their own credibility. They “deconstruct” themselves, since they reproduce the constant contradiction of their constative and their performative textual components with their own operations’. While we do not embrace Luhmann’s (2000) wholesale reduction of the ‘system’ of
the mass media to the ‘autopoietic’ (self-producing and self-contained) operations of technical codes, the internal workings and contradictions that he identifies in the workings of television contribute to what we have explored here as media renewal. Let us elaborate.

As Mellencamp (2006: 128) states, ‘With its strategy of creation/contradiction/cancellation, TV is the outbreak and the protective action’. We have argued that television news modulates between these functions. It is unable to stem the terrorism that exploits its own connectivity, yet as a system it nonetheless has a regulatory mechanism – constitutive of and subject to an interaction order. For all the technological shifts embedded in the huge social, cultural, and political transformations over the past quarter of a century, it is this system that has become even more attuning of and attuned to the rituals and routines of its publics.

Ultimately, television news has to contain and render familiar and safe the terrors that it imagines and delivers, for if it did not do so it could render itself obsolete, unable to attract and maintain the audiences who largely collude in the safety of sanitisation and massive selectivity, as enforced by the medium’s ‘standards of taste and decency’.

The tensions in public and political discourses as to the viability, legitimacy, and ‘progress’ of the War on Terror are not merely reflected or refracted in media representations, but are actually inextricably bound up in the presentation of the electronic media (Lash, 2002: 71). Television news today has a very powerful capacity to predict, pre-empt, and even pre-mediate events, ushering in and regulating a climate of insecurity and terror. It is the ‘oxygen’ – or rather the pivotal ‘actor’ – in the connectivity that is required both by terrorists in disseminating terror and by those who proclaim to be engaged in fighting terror (either through assuaging or exacerbating threats depending on which serves their particular political and military objectives).

To summarise: the crisis in news discourse identified here results from a fundamental binary or contradiction in the operations of television news in the post-9/11 era.

Firstly, television news amplifies (and conflates) different threats and insecurities (economic, human, environmental) in a number of intersecting ways. It does this through the following:

- Promoting immediacy, intimacy, and visuality as core criteria for determining news agendas. This economy of liveness and connectivity coupled with the textual and graphic enhancements of ‘televisuality’ is the most effective global delivery system for