It has become clear from the evidence presented in this book that even though televised news is perceived as an important source of news by people surveyed around the world, while some of its information hits home there is much that does not get through to its audiences. We know that people can be primed in terms of what to think about by reports in news media, with television playing a prominent role here. Being aware of specific news events or issues, however, does not mean that people know a lot about them or really understand what they are all about. In reaching conclusions about learning from the news however we must look closely at the measures used to assess this.

Tests of news recall have produced mixed results, but when people are asked unaided to remember the news from a broadcast they have just heard or seen they often struggle. Of course, such tests might represent an inadequate way of testing for people's news memories (Berry, 1983b). It might also be the case that audiences are not that interested in the news being presented to them in specific bulletins (Levy, 1978; Gantz, 1979), that they are not attuned much to the news in general (Genova & Greenberg, 1979) or that they are simply distracted by other things a lot of the time when they watch television (Collett & Lamb, 1986; Gunter et al., 1995).

There are undoubtedly audience factors at play that mediate how much viewers remember and understand from the television news. Even when they are paying attention and are interested, there are limits to people’s abilities to absorb more than a specified amount of information within any given period of time. These limits, however, can also vary with factors that are under the control of news professionals. News editors can help viewers of televised news to remember more of what they
see and hear by taking into account the ways that cognitive responses to news can be influenced by the way it is constructed and presented.

There have been claims, of course, that television can be an inherently problematic medium to learn from because people think it is easy (Salomon, 1984). This message was reinforced by findings showing that people learn better from reading printed news than from watching televised news (Gunter et al., 1984; Furnham & Gunter, 1985; DeFleur & Cronin, 1991). However, these observations have been challenged by later research conducted with children that showed that television could deliver better memory performance for presented information content than could print versions of the same narrative content (Walma van der Molen & van der Voort, 1997, 1998; Walma van der Molen, 1998). Other research showed that children can be taught how to pay closer attention to television programmes, including the news that did not usually interest them, and to learn that it was necessary to invest mental effort into learning from the medium (Kelley et al., 1985). The failure of television to perform as well as print derives from the tendency to perceive that learning from television does not require the effort of learning from print. Once this perception has been effectively dispelled, television can perform as well as print (Salomon, 1984). Indeed, provided it uses production techniques that reinforce key informational elements of news stories, television can produce superior memory performance to print (Walma van der Molen & Van der Voort, 1998).

Thus, television news can be effective as a communicator of information about the latest world events. Despite this reassuring observation, many controlled tests of learning from televised news have confirmed that substantive information losses can occur from news broadcasts as a consequence of the decisions taken by news professionals regarding the telling of stories, the packaging of stories in programmes, the speed at which information is presented and the use of multiple visual presentation techniques that collectively overload viewers’ cognitive information processing capacities.

Leaving aside the production techniques that derive from an often ill-conceived amateur psychology of the news audience that pervades newsrooms (Gunter, 1987), there are other pressures on news professionals that frequently cascade down from more senior levels of their organisations. These pressures are financial and market driven. The news environment of the 21st century is very crowded. There are large numbers of news suppliers. The emergence of broadband internet and digital communications technologies has not only spawned a lot of new