

A decorative laurel wreath border encircles the text. At the top, a smaller, more ornate wreath-like element frames the text "CLUB PAPER CXLIV".

CLUB PAPER  
CXLIV

THE LENGTH OF EACH  
BROADCAST NEWS PARADIGM  
IS SHORTER THAN  
THE PRECEDING ONE

by  
ROBERT H. JORDAN, JR.

THE CHICAGO  
LITERARY CLUB

2014



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## The Length of Each Broadcast News Paradigm Is Shorter Than the Preceding One

**M**Y earliest memories are of people telling me stories. My mother and two of her five sisters always read to me, when I was a toddler, while my father was away during World War II. And once he returned from overseas when the war ended, I would be enchanted listening to his imaginary battle stories—yarns my dad would spin about fighting the Germans single-handedly while protecting his frightened friend, Harry.

So, it is not surprising to me that my adult life has been in the pursuit of storytelling—reporting news and feature stories and, later, doing documentary production in my own company, Video Family Biographies. All of it involves telling stories.

I have often guessed that storytelling goes back to the earliest form of communication. I think of Og, the primitive caveman who, 2.5 million years ago, enthralled his clan with tales of his hunting exploits—sitting around a flickering fire in a dark grotto—telling his listeners how he brought down a “special, tasty kill” using his trusty atlatl and spear.



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Of course, some linguists such as Noam Chomsky and anthropologists such as Richard Klein say that language, specifically the spoken word, appeared much later among modern humans, between thirty-five thousand and fifty thousand years ago, and that the ability to speak words and use syntax was only recently genetically hard wired into our brains.

I love telling stories, and people over the years tell me they have enjoyed listening to my stories. I have found that because I have a vivid imagination it is easy to concoct the material which forms the basis of stories. But learning how to write well is not an automatic coefficient of telling stories. Poor writers can botch the best of stories while good writers can make a mundane subject seem fascinating.

But for the first half of my life, while I enjoyed a good story, writing was of little importance to me. I had no idea that my professional life would entail writing and that journalism would consume the second half of my life.

I firmly believe that part of my ability to rely on my imagination comes from the days of radio. In the 1940s, during the so-called golden days of radio, I was a preschooler who would be glued to the front of our console radio—sitting as closely as possible as if being next to the speaker made me closer to Superman, Sgt. Preston of the Yukon, or the Shadow.

Radio shows were so compelling—with their creative sound effects men—that I could visualize what was taking place during the program. When Sgt. Preston of the Yukon—over the howling scream of freezing, whistling winds—shouted, “On, King, on, you huskies,” I could see him standing at the rear of his dogsled, whip in hand, urging his splendid team of yelping dogs to strain at their harnesses as they chased a villain or raced at blazing speed from one snow-covered location to another. I could visualize Superman

streaking through the skies at an insane velocity—because, after all, he was faster than a speeding bullet. Parenthetically, I am one of the impressionable kids who took safety pins and attached a bath towel around my neck so I could have a cape like Superman. My attempt to fly from the roof of our garage to the nearby tree failed miserably. I bounced from branch to branch towards the ground, eventually landing at the base of the tree with a thud. As I lay on the ground, shaking off the jar from the jolting fall I knew what had happened. Kryptonite! Someone must have had placed the power-sapping substance nearby. I wondered who it was.

Radio in the '40s was a wonderful, magic flying carpet that could transport you anywhere in a vivid, lifelike manner. Your only restriction was your imagination. I can remember my disappointment when I saw my first photo of the Lone Ranger. He and Tonto were nothing like I had imagined them to be.

I was a true child of radio. My mother was constantly sending off box tops to General Mills and Kellogg's for all sorts of gizmos and gadgets—most worthless, or that broke five minutes after you received them in the mail, but which were nonetheless prized possessions because they connected me to my radio heroes. I still have my genuine Sgt. Preston of the Yukon brass whistle, with his signature etched on the side.

A few years later when I was in the first or second grade, my good friend Medrid Dennis told me, as we were walking home from school, that his father had just bought something called a television. He described the device as being like a radio with movies inside, and I couldn't wait to see this unbelievable contrivance. Med told me to come by his house around five in the afternoon, when the programs would begin coming on. I was there at four. We sat and watched the small, twelve-inch-in-diameter screen, looking at the test pattern for an hour, mesmerized by the



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light and the black and white image coming out of the console. Then, when the first program came on—a crudely produced cowboy show called *Western Corral*—I was enthralled. What was this enchanting device that brought picture stories right into your home?

Med's father told us that television would eventually kill radio—that no one would want to *listen* to programs when they could *see* what was going on at the same time. I remember thinking how upsetting it would be if radio did go away. I worried about that for a long time. If radio disappeared, what would happen to all my friends—Superman, the Lone Ranger, Sgt. Preston, and all the rest? This television thing was unsettling to me, yet thrilling at the same time.

Day after day, I would stop by Med's house to watch television. And even though television was still in its infancy and was pretty much glorified radio (radio that you could see), it was nonetheless transforming. Even as a child, I knew that television was greater than radio. Radio, the friend that had fed my inextinguishable imagination—radio, my source of hours of pleasure—was now inferior. A new broadcast medium now owned the airwaves.

Up to this point in history, the only way you could *see* what was going on in the world was at the cinema. Fox newsreels were originally seen prior to feature films in movie theaters around the world—starting in 1919 with the silent Fox News Service and ending in 1963 shortly before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. A favorite subject of the early newsreels was aviation. One of the significant events of the twentieth century was photographed on May 20, 1927, when a Movietone camera crew filmed Charles Lindbergh taking off from Roosevelt Field on his celebrated transatlantic flight from New York to Paris. The raw film negative was rushed back from Long Island to be processed

and developed. Later, a print was projected for euphoric audiences at the Roxy Theater in Manhattan—the same evening of that very day—inspiring Fox to create Movietone News.

This process of shooting film at a big event or news scene and getting it out to the public would not change for the next fifty years. This would be the way audiences would see news events. The cameras in the 1920s and '30s were huge, heavy contraptions with large Mickey Mouse-ear film magazines attached to the top of the camera. The cameras were mounted on large, heavy wooden tripods. And for mobility, the camera crews would stand in the back of a station wagon that had the top cut out—almost like a pickup truck except it was a car. They also carried smaller Bell & Howell hand-held cameras that shot silent film.

The newsreels established a format which news broadcasts follow to this day. World events generally led off the program, followed by stories of national interest. A fashion or entertainment piece would round out the show before ending with the sports segment. Between 1919 and 1963 Fox Movietone produced 4,578 biweekly newsreels.

My childhood friends and I went to the movie theater every weekend. Tickets were a quarter and for another quarter you could buy a hot dog and a soda pop. A box of popcorn was a dime. And you would get to see a double feature plus a cartoon. We never called ahead—we just showed up, usually in the middle of the movie. We would then stay to see the movie come back around until someone in the group would say, “I think this is where we came in.” Then we would leave.

The fifteen-minute Movietone reel with news and features was my favorite. You could see exotic faraway places on the other side of the world and learn what was happening across the globe. Two things happened later that increased the amount of news that was



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fed to audiences: cameras became smaller and war broke out.

World War II was the first time actual news reporters were used to tell stories. Before then, beginning in the late 1920s, early radio news was usually nothing more than a dramatized documentary of events. Live recordings were unheard of and technologically difficult if not impossible. Rather than simply report events, radio producers felt dramatizing the events would bring the news home more effectively.

One of the earliest dramas of this type, known as newsacting, was the *March of Time* with narrated and dramatized news events produced by Roy Larsen, who later became president of Time, Inc. First heard on CBS on March 6, 1931, the show was broadcast on Friday nights and sounded very much like the movie newsreels. Like the newsreels, the show was built around a narrator who led listeners into the dramatized events. There were three narrators during the show's run: Ted Husing, Harry Von Zell, and one of the longest "Voices of Time," Westbrook Van Voorhis.

This was how radio listeners got their news at the time. The idea of simply broadcasting the news was too new and, for many, boring. Following the development of the CBS series, you could see the changes taking place in radio news at the time. By 1940, the dramatized versions were being phased out and news "actualities," broadcast from other countries, were beginning to be heard. The "news reporter" was more and more becoming prominent. This was partly due to the change in technology, the war, and the idea that an eyewitness could best tell listeners what was happening. Radio news was beginning to be transformed into the broadcasting medium which we are all familiar with today.

In June 1970, I was back in Nashville, Tennessee. My family had moved to Atlanta, Georgia, from Nashville when I was twelve years old and I continued to grow up in Atlanta. But after my

lackluster college days were interrupted by the Vietnam War, I returned to Nashville to finish college, after my army days were over.

In need of a job, in the summer of 1970, I had heard that a Nashville television station was looking to hire its first minorities for on-air work. So, I went to the station, WSM Television, an NBC affiliate, and applied. After being called back a few times for more interviews and meetings, I was hired.

I can remember how thrilled I was to actually walk into the studio from where I had, twenty-five years before, seen my first television program—*Western Corral*. Now, the station had another claim to fame: it was the station that owned the *Grand Ole Opry*, the Valhalla of country music.

I was hired as a booth announcer in June 1970. During this time, television stations had announcers who read commercials live from a broadcast booth every half hour during station breaks. Beforehand, I would call my then-new wife, Sharon, and say, "Sharon, I'll be on in two minutes." Sharon would listen to television and hear (but not see) me say, "Available at Walgreens, CVS, Osco and your neighborhood True Value Hardware Store." Then, since the FCC had mandated that every station had to do a station ID at the top of every hour, I would say, "This is WSM Television, the broadcasting service of the National Life and Accident Insurance Company, Nashville, Tennessee."

I was working for a television station, but it was like I was on radio. You could hear me but not see me. But soon I began to learn the business. I began appearing on camera on a morning-television country music program. I taught myself how to draw my weather maps based on data and information from the National Weather Service. I was a TV weatherman in the morning and a newsreader for the rest of the day.



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Working in a small market like Nashville was like going to graduate school, in the sense that I learned so much about television production and television news. I struck up a friendship with the radio news director, a crusty ex-Associated Press editor named Al Green. Al would give me wire copy to rewrite. I would work on it and give him back the copy, which he would redline and scratch through like I was a third grader turning in bad homework. I worked with Al for about six months until I learned how to write copy that he approved of—stories that would make him smile.

I stayed at WSM for three years, learning everything I could about the business. Then one day, in March 1973, I received a call from a man named Chuck Harrison. Chuck said he was the news director at WGN Television in Chicago. He said he had seen me on the air when he was passing through Nashville and liked what he saw. He asked if I would be interested in working in Chicago. He offered to fly me to the city for an interview.

I told Sharon about this offer, to which she gave a tepid reaction. "Chicago?" she said. "What happened to our plans to return to Atlanta?" This was her reaction to Chicago, having never spent a winter in the North. You can imagine what our life was like a year later during our first freezing winter in the Windy City.

I remember the day I walked into WGN Television for my interview. Chuck had picked me up at O'Hare. When I walked off the plane, Chuck was there to greet me. Back then, anyone could walk to the gate to meet a plane. On the way in to the station, he told me about my duties: I would be reporting the news.

In Nashville I had never worked much as a reporter. I was the morning weatherman and the anchorman of the noon news. I had seldom reported from the scene of a story, and I was apprehensive about accepting the job.

Chuck told me about the wonderful history of WGN Television

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and WGN Radio. I learned that the station had two helicopters for the number one radio program in the country—the *Wally Phillips Show*. On the television side there was an equally iconic program called *Bozo Circus*. The program was so popular, I was told, that when women became pregnant they would send in for tickets. And since the waiting list was seven years, the mothers-to-be would receive their tickets when their children were six or seven years old.

When Chuck and I pulled into the parking lot of the station, next to the heliport where two choppers were parked, I began to realize that working for this outfit was big time. Little did I know, however, that a major paradigm shift was about to take place in news reporting—the first of many to come.

Chuck took me into the station to first meet the man, the general manager, who had built WGN Television: the famous Ward Quall. Our meeting went well and then Chuck took me to the other side of the building to show me the newsroom.

As we walked down the long hall leading to the newsroom, I could hear the shrill clatter of keys hitting the typewriters—dozens of typewriters in a smoky room full of people with their heads buried in their work. There were radio newswriters working on the five- to ten-minute newscasts heard every thirty minutes. In another part of the room there were television reporters and news writers and producers and assignment desk editors. This was a busy place.

After looking around the room, I realized that, as in Nashville, I was the only black person in the room. There were no females either. Upon further examination I did discover a black female secretary—Gloria Brown—who, I later learned, had just moved into the newsroom from the sales offices on the other side of the building.



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It was March 1973, and I accepted the position at WGN Television. Sharon and our six-month-old daughter Karen (who, thirty years later, would be my on-air competition when she anchored the weekend news for rival Channel 7, ABC News) joined me later that year, in June.

This was a time when a major effort was being made to hire minorities and women in television. At WGN Television, Merri Dee, Floyd Brown and I were the new faces of color on the air. NBC hired Carole Simpson and Jim Tilmon, CBS hired Burly Hines and Harry Porterfield, and ABC brought in Bob Petty.

Covering news in Chicago was worlds apart from reporting stories in Nashville. A news team, called a crew, consisted of four men—a reporter, cameraman, sound technician, and a lighting man. We would all ride around in Ford Crown Victorias—because of the large trunk space—moving from story to story throughout the day.

We would stay connected to the assignment desk at the station via a two-way Motorola walkie-talkie radio—the size and weight of a brick. Or if we needed to talk to someone at WGN Television without the other stations listening in to our transmission—as we often did to see what they were covering—we would pull over and use a coin phone, then found on every corner.

At breaking stories like multiple murders and large fires, the crews would be met at the scene by one of our two motorcycle couriers, who would rush the film to the lab to be processed. That would take about forty minutes for a four-hundred-foot roll of film. Then the couriers would grab the film and race to the television station so the film could be cut or edited. From the time an event occurred, it would take at least an hour or two before it appeared on the air.

Aside from breaking stories like fires, murders, and other

mayhem, most of the news consisted of organized press conferences held at the many hotels across the city. It was after attending hundreds of press conferences that I learned to make news judgments about what was important that a person was saying and what was not.

Newspaper, radio, and television reporters have always sought important or significant quotes to use in telling the story. Starting in the 1940s, when producers began using eyewitnesses instead of dramatized productions of events, using quotes was often the foundation upon which the gravitas of a story is determined. But in order to record those special quotes which would be used in newscasts later in the day, the camera had to be rolling, yet since a four-hundred-foot-roll film magazine contained only about ten minutes' worth of film on a continuous roll, you had to be careful about what you rolled on and what you didn't.

As the leader of the news crew, the reporter would give the cameraman hand signals on when to roll and when to cut. Two fingers across the neck was the signal to cut. One index finger pointing and rotating in a circle meant roll. By carefully managing your film usage, you could be sure you were rolling when the speaker or interviewee was saying something important. That way you would be less likely to miss a significant quote.

Additionally, most cameramen traveled with a second fully loaded film magazine that he could attach to the camera in about a minute and a half. At an appropriate time the reporter would signal the cameraman to change magazines ("mags") when he was getting low on film, so that he would be ready for the important material that was about to come. The cameraman would have to open the camera door, remove the used magazine, attach a new one, and then thread it through all the gears and sprockets inside the camera—all as quickly as possible. You were then ready, once



again, to record history when something important was said.

But since press conferences sometimes went on for over an hour, especially if there were several speakers, you knew sooner or later that you would have to reload both film magazines and do something called "going into the bag."

The bag was a portable darkroom. Picture a large black shirt with the neck closed and the bottom sealed by a zipper. Now put that shirt inside another shirt just to make sure that no light could get inside and you have a film-changing bag.

No matter how carefully you managed your film consumption, at a long press conference every cameraman eventually ran out of film and had to go into the bag. Cameramen who had been rolling a lot ran out of film sooner than guys who had not rolled on much of the action. But, if your camera wasn't running, you risked missing an important quote, because no matter how quickly a cameraman could turn a camera back on, it would nonetheless be too late and you would have missed an important quote.

Imagine what it would have been like if your camera was off when Mayor Richard J. Daley said, "The police are not here to create disorder, they're here to preserve disorder."

Going into the bag was a scary time for most reporters. Once the cameraman was out of film, he would have to take both magazines and two film cans, stack them on top of each other, and then go in the bag. To do this he would unzip the bottom of the bag and insert the mags and film cans and then zip up the bag. Next he would stick his hands inside the sleeves (or arms of the shirt) all the way into the body of the garment. Inside the bag he could open the mags and take the old exposed film and put it inside the cans. He would also have to take the unexposed new film and load it into the two magazines. All of this took several minutes. And because the film could be ruined if the cameraman tried to



stop midway through the process, he was virtually locked in the bag until the changing job was completed.

Chances are some cameraman missed Richard Nixon when he said, "I'm not a crook." He either was not rolling or was in the bag. Either way he faced a big chewing out from his editor for missing a great quote. But technology was already in the works that would change the way news would be delivered.

Video tape made its debut in the late 1970s. By then, film crews had been reduced to "one-man bands," because the film cameras had become smaller and were using a type of film stock that contained a magnetic stripe on the side of the film for recording audio. The new video-tube cameras, however, were big, bulky and heavy. They were also connected to an equally heavy audio box by an "umbilical" cord. So the crews went back to four men because you needed a sound man and also a lighting man (since the new video cameras were not very good in low light). But because there was no film, there was no processing time. The couriers could meet you at the scene, grab the videotape, and race straight to the station, where the raw tape could be put on the air quickly.

It was now 1976, and I had been at WGN Television for three years. We were still using film while all the other stations had transitioned to video tape. I applied to CBS Network News and was hired. I began working in the Midwest Bureau out of the offices over the Channel 2 studios on McClurg Court.

As a Midwest reporter working for the network, my stories were on the *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite* or the *CBS Morning News*. The Midwest Bureau covered stories of national import, mostly from Ohio, west to Colorado, and all of the states in between. Working at the network was like going to post-graduate

school. Now, there were five-man crews (you also had a field producer who accompanied you on stories helping with the setup and doing a lot of the phone communication between Chicago and New York) when you were doing a farm story in a small town in Nebraska or a crime story in Detroit or a weather story in Duluth. It was exciting work, but the travel was constant and seemingly never ending.

In 1980, while I was still at CBS, WGN Television began to expand its news coverage, becoming a "super station." I saw this as an opportunity to stop traveling and to return to local news. I applied to WGN Television and was accepted. The electronic age was still in the midst of determining its direction. The paradigm had not fully completed its shift.

Television stations were using a format from Sony called Beta, but there was also another alternative, called VHS, that was competing with Sony. And there were even two types of electronic devices to support both formats: Beta recorders and VHS recorders. Video stores began popping up on every block to support the burgeoning industry of rental movies and programs. Usually the better, higher-quality format wins out, but that was not to be the case in this war.

Television stations continued to support the Beta format because it was clearer, sharper, smaller, and more durable. VHS, on the other hand, although less expensive, was grainy, dull, and subject to glitches in the recorded product. These, however, were not the deciding factors.

What determined the outcome of this battle was not triple A-quality programming, it was triple X-rated video. The porn industry had standardized its library of video tapes on the VHS format. Those who bought video recorders, mostly men, did so with the

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knowledge that their local video stores stocked movie material (also X-rated tapes) in mainly the VHS format. VHS recorders thus quickly became the customary way for consumers to record and view video material, whether it was your daughter's first birthday party or the family vacation to the beach—or a private romp around the bedroom.

Television coverage of news continued to evolve in the early 1980s. Stations began to experiment with microwave signals and soon learned that video could be sent from one location to another via microwave. Stations like WGN TV were already sending their signals up to satellites, so receiving dishes were erected on tall buildings around cities.

To feed the signals to the dishes, stations began designing specially equipped vehicles called mini-cam trucks. Each truck contained a mast which, like a super-long periscope, could be elongated to shoot a signal over the average house or building to hit the dish atop the John Hancock or the Sears Building.

Now breaking news could, for the first time, be broadcast live. A mini-cam truck driver could go to the scene, put up the mast, call the station, and talk to an engineer who would help the cameraman orient the sending dish atop the mast, so the signal was hitting the receiving dish atop the Hancock Building. Once the signal was strongly hitting the receiving dish, you could go live.

By 1980, satellites, or "birds," as they were called, had been strung in a geo-synchronous orbit around the earth. WGN Television became a so-called superstation, broadcasting around our half of the planet via satellite. The station expanded its news program to an hour and also began to counter-program, going on the air at nine in the evening instead of ten as the other local stations were doing.



Satellites hovering about 22,500 miles above the earth would relay most television programming to world viewers. Each bird was composed of a number of transponders, or independent receive-transmit units.

By the late 1990s CNN had designed portable, freestanding satellite uplinks referred to as flyaway units. These mobile crews were introduced for electronic newsgathering (ENG) work. This meant that TV links could be quickly set up in remote locations—including those in foreign countries—to transmit news to viewers on the other side of the globe.

A flyaway satellite uplink, complete with a telephone link, was so compact that with only seven suitcases and a three-man crew, CNN reporters could fly anywhere around the globe—no matter how remote—and broadcast live from the scene. The shiny aluminum uplink dish collapsed like a flamenco dancer's fan or could be spread open to form a parabolic dish. Other suitcases contained batteries, camera and cables, a reflector, tripod, and a couple of oscilloscopes. That's all it took to go live from the middle of the desert or from the balcony of a Baghdad hotel overlooking "shock and awe" as bombs fell on the city.

This ability to quickly go live was good and bad—good in that news was getting to the audience more quickly, bad in that reporters had less time to gather information and check to make sure their reports or stories were accurate before putting them out over the air.

Reporters have always had deadlines, but historically those cutoff points were hours or even days away. Now, a reporter had only moments before it was time to feed the beast. All of a sudden television stations had a new toy—the live shot.

In a television-ratings-crazy business model, each station constantly tries to outdo the other to garner a larger audience.

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The more viewers you have, the more you can charge to sell advertising time. Over the years, this has caused some stations to come up with some of the dumbest, wackiest, ill-conceived ideas a desperate TV executive could think of.

Prior to the 1980s, television news had been a "loss leader" during the broadcast day. Stations didn't sell very much time during a newscast; just enough to help pay some of the salaries and buy new cameras and news vehicles.

But in the '80s, with swanky news sets—flashy news anchors, and targeted efforts to draw in and increase ratings—news became a viable part of the station bottom line. General managers began adding additional newscasts and spending more money on glitzing up the newscast. Boosting ratings became such a driving force that desperate television bosses began hiring news consultants to help them increase their numbers.

The leading consultant at the time was Frank Magid. Magid was known in particular for encouraging scores of local stations to adopt the "action news" format, in which traditional news items were interspersed with a liberal dose of crime coverage and lighter entertainments like human-interest stories. He also inaugurated early morning newscasts in many local markets.

To advise local news directors on ways to attract bigger audiences, Magid conducted extensive viewer surveys. The results could radically affect the look and sound of the program, from anchors' hair and attire to their on-air repartee. Magid was an early advocate of the convivial banter among anchors known as "happy talk."

But what displeases me the most about this sometimes reckless approach towards beating the competition was that some gullible news directors allowed Magid and his consultants to convince seasoned news journalists that writers should begin breaking all



of the rules of grammar. Magid's folks persuaded news directors to have their writers and reporters begin writing stories in the present tense, even for events that happened hours or days in the past. Their specious rational was that speaking in the present tense gave a sense of immediacy to the story.

Sooner or later, however, you're going to have to revert to the past tense in order to explain clearly when the events had transpired. And at that time, I contend, you are confusing your audience. How often have you heard, "A fire breaks out in a high-rise." No! It "broke" out in a high-rise because it happened this morning. But that is the baloney you have heard since the consultants began advising broadcast executives—who were for the most part salesmen, not journalists—and they bought it. Newspapers never drank that bogus Kool-Aid and did not fall for the double talk the consultants were spewing.

The video-tape paradigm lasted for almost twenty-five years—half as long as film—as the main format for broadcasting news stories. In the mid- to late 1990s, videotape was beginning to be phased out in favor of digital formats.

Entire newsrooms became digital; WGN Television was one of them. For years writers had used five-page copy books—containing a carbon sheet between each page—on which to write stories. This was so everyone would literally be on the same page. When the book was broken down, the pages went to the teleprompter, the director, the producer, and both anchors.

To make sure all of the pages were in their proper places, the script-piles would be stacked about thirty minutes prior to airtime. Blank filler pages containing only the "slug," or story title, were placed in spots where the finished scripts would eventually be placed. It was a laborious process, but was done this way to make



sure all of the key people were reading the same page at the same time. Even so, pages would stick together or the teleprompter operator would sometimes mix-up pages, and anchors and directors would be on different stories and that meant trouble.

When newsrooms went digital, everything (the scripts, the video, the graphics, the audio—everything) went into a giant computer or server. Eventually, archived stories and all of the historical information would be stored on the server.

On the streets, when crews were sent to a story to go live, the truck would pull up to the location, and the operator would raise the mast and begin aiming in the general direction of the Hancock Building or the Willis Tower. No longer was pinpoint accuracy necessary. With digital signals you could even bounce the signal off office buildings, making it ricochet like balls on a billiard table, until it hit the receive dish.

The new digital cameras were smaller, more sensitive to low light, had a longer battery life, and could dump the video right into a laptop computer on a desk in the back of a mini-cam truck. This is where the story was edited—right on the laptop using one of the new editing programs like Final Cut.

By 2003 or 2004, less than ten years after digital formats were introduced, Internet technology began sweeping into newsrooms. With the popularity of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media newcomers came a revolution in broadcast techniques.

Newspapers like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Chicago Tribune* began expanding their digital operations. This meant that the consumer was able to view or read content right from his or her computer and to do so for free. But nothing is really free except a mother's love. Newspapers began losing readers and subscriptions plummeted. Papers began expanding their Internet operations, hoping to offset the revenue



loss by slowly including ads on the web pages and even placing ads on the sacrosanct front page of the newspaper. Television stations also began placing emphasis on web coverage, adding the newly formed position of electronic journalist to the staff.

But while the digital paradigm was still trying to gain a foothold on viewers and readers, the meteoric growth of so-called smart phones—cellphones containing cameras and other applications—began to alter the way news organizations approached getting their product to the public. The paradigm had shifted again.

During the May 20, 2012, NATO Summit in Chicago, television stations were able to broadcast live from the demonstrations. Reporters and camera crews, marching alongside protestors, were able to send a signal via cellphone or over the Internet—using something called a Dejero Box—directly to the servers in their respective stations and could then broadcast out to the public a live, unedited report—raw and sometimes profane—that brought the event directly into the homes of viewers. CNN needed seven suitcases and three men, ten years ago, to go live from anywhere. Now, with one cellphone-type Dejero Box, a single cameraman, a one-man band, could report live from any spot on the globe as long as there was a cell signal.

In recent years another innovation has come to the aid of TV newspeople working in remote areas: satellite phones. Although limited in quality, this approach uses satellite audio channels to send highly compressed video signals back to the newsroom.

So, during this last seventy years, the paradigm for disseminating news, information, and entertainment has shifted from radio several times: from film to videotape, roughly forty years from 1940 to 1980; from video tape to digital, twenty years from 1980

## BROADCAST NEWS PARADIGM

to 2000; from digital to Internet, ten years; and now to broadcasting via Dejero-type devices which are the current standard for rapid distribution of information.

These progressive paradigm shifts—each shorter than the preceding one—mean that people now have near-instantaneous access to information, compared to our parents who sometimes had to wait days to learn about an event. And they might not have even seen what happened for weeks through photos or newspapers.

So, does this lightning-fast process that floods us with data and material mean that storytelling is any better? Regrettably, in the vast majority of cases, I think not. Welcome to the blurb generation where people “tweet” their thoughts in 140 or fewer characters.

The pendulum of communication is swinging away from long-form writing as the current generation grows more accustomed to the fleeting, choppy thoughts found on Facebook.

Enthusiasts of mobile devices—cellphones, iPads and the like—have begun to communicate on a global level, flashing text messages and photos around the planet as easily as your grandmother spoke to her neighbor over the backyard fence. These devices can already receive one language and translate it into another in a split second, so that now, billions of people are the readers, the audience, the targets of data and information for good reasons as well as evil intentions.

But once the pendulum of communication reaches an apex, it will begin to swing back in the other direction. It always does. At some point our unquenchable thirst for seeking to communicate faster and to more people—with bites, blurbs and phrases—will fizzle out. Equilibrium is always the force that keeps mankind from going over the proverbial edge.



## BROADCAST NEWS PARADIGM

There may never be a complete return to the classic forms of storytelling. But I doubt that the love of such will ever die. Og, the caveman, knew that a well-crafted story is like nothing else. It is able to fill the spirit with exciting and compelling thoughts and images that can last a lifetime.

Today, instead of speaking in a cave, sitting atop a broken stalagmite stump—where Og's voice only echoed off a wall—speakers can now tell stories that are heard and seen around the globe in the blink of an eye.

But that paradigm, too, is about to change . . . Stay tuned.

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