

Investigating True Crime Television

“Infotainment: An Industrial History of Turning Broadcast News into Prime Time Entertainment”

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The rise of 1980s era reality TV came in to being as an economic necessity that normalized broadcast networks’ manipulation of televisual modes of production to suit revenue and profit goals in the face of media conglomeration. A historiographic trade press discourse analysis offers insight in to how the once concrete, generic lines between news and drama began to intersect. As Holt and Perren note, “recent forays in to genre study have looked at television as a means of addressing how industrial and textual practice combine to create strategies for reducing risk, ritualizing production, managing audience expectations, and codifying marketing practices.”¹ But what happens when production practices confuse audiences, or when the pushing of generic boundaries overtly deceives the viewing public? Examining the backlash broadcast news networks divisions faced when they employed aesthetic and narrative traits of true crime docudramas and reality-based programming can help scholars better understand the limitations of generic reconceptualizations.

Vérité styled camera work and dramatic reenactments are common techniques used in, reality-based programs such as *Unsolved Mysteries* (NBC) and *America’s Most Wanted*(FOX). Their high ratings suggest that audiences have an appetite for seeing stories unfold on air, even if actors and camera crews fictionalized actual events. Network programming executives gambled on this assumption when CBS introduced *Saturday Night with Connie Chung*(1989) and NBC premiered the news magazine *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*(1989). Both programs relied on actor portrayals of actual events. CBS’s *Saturday Night* used a direct approach. They cast high profile actors such James Earl Jones to depict civil rights leader Vernon Johns in a short film followed by a panel discussion which Chung moderated. Chung made an effort to distance her

program from syndicated tabloid news shows such as *A Current Affair*. She called her program a “new genre in television news” and asserted that it featured “motion picture quality...dramatizations.” Chung purposefully avoided using the word reenactment because she believed it held “too negative a connotation.”ⁱⁱⁱ Chung’s rhetorical choices makes evident that news divisions drew on reality TV’s traits to capture an audience, but they were careful to separate themselves from the burgeoning form of low art.

NBC attempted to repeat the ratings success CBS’s *60 Minutes* had in featuring celebrity news personas as storytellers. But, after several failed efforts the news division reluctantly partnered with NBC Entertainment President Brandon Tartikoff. His vision was to develop a news program intended to bring in ratings and profits through producing dramatic vignettes of events that were not caught on camera. In the summer of 1989 the aforementioned program *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* premiered. From the onset, the show’s format was a departure from traditional prime time news programs. For instance, *YTT* had “hosts” rather than anchors. These hosts physically moved within and out of the mise-en-scene as they narrated the reenactments.ⁱⁱⁱ Executive Producer Sid Feders defended the use of reenactments likening them to artist renderings of courtroom scenes published in newspapers. Nonetheless, internal NBC focus groups revealed that despite having the hosts clearly state that the program contained reenactments audience members had trouble discerning the difference between staged and actual footage. The NBC News division ultimately resolved the problem when they relinquished control of the program to the Entertainment division. No aesthetic changes were made to the series.^{iv}

Both NBC and CBS were transparent in their efforts dramatize the news through using common reality TV aesthetic techniques. ABC, however, drew ire from critics and audiences

when they reported a story of an American diplomat who was selling classified material to the K.G.B.. On July 21, 1989 Peter Jennings introduced ABC News Correspondent John McWethy's report of the then alleged spy Felix Bloch. The story that aired included, what appeared to be, videotaped surveillance footage complete with electronic time code, a grainy black and white picture and even camera lens crosshairs. The segment producers did not include any disclaimer stating that the footage was a simulation that ABC produced.^v Four days later Jennings was forced to give an on air apology for the deception calling it a "production error." Although the reenactment aired for merely ten seconds it nonetheless drew sharp criticism. In a *New York Times* Op-Ed piece Fred W Friendly likened ABC's act to the 1950s era quiz show scandal.^{vi}

Ultimately, the use of dramatic reenactments in network news did not take hold. Perhaps "infotainment" aesthetics of the late 1980s reached an audience threshold. Or it could be that reenactments were no longer needed in an era when news outlets could rely on amateur video footage with increasing regularity. Nonetheless, in constructing larger historical narratives about the rise of reality-based programming an interrogation of how news divisions flirted with the popular genre should not be ignored.

ⁱ Holt, J., & Perren, A. (2009). Introduction: Does the world really need one more field of study? In J. Holt & A. Perren (Eds.), *Media Industries History, Theory and Method* (pp. 1-16). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

ⁱⁱ Carter, Bill. "Stars to Re-enact News on Chung Program." *New York Times*, September 19, 1989, late edition, sec. C, 22.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow Intro, Disclaimer & Close - 11/28/1989." Video file, 04:37. Youtube. Posted by Houstontvnews, February 25, 2014. Accessed August 15, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqOF6uZYcco>.

^{iv} Carter, Bill. "NBC-TV to End Dramatizations of News." *New York Times*, November 21, 1989. Accessed August 15, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/21/arts/nbc-tv-to-end-dramatizations-of-news.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

^v "Top News Story of July 21, 1989." Video file, 03:45. Youtube. Posted by Sterling Rutherford, April 26, 2014. Accessed August 15, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pFQE_nyhtE.

^{vi} Friendly, Fred R. "On Television: News, Lies and Videotape." *New York Times*, August 6, 1989, sec. 2, 1.