THE BIAS OF
LANGUAGE, THE

BIAS OF PICTURES
by Postman

When a television news show distorts the truth by altering or manufacturing facts through re-creations, a television viewer is defenseless even if a re-creation is properly labeled. Viewers are still vulnerable to misinformation since they will not know (at least in the case of docudramas) what parts are fiction and what parts are not. But the problems of verisimilitude posed by re-creations pale to insignificance when compared to the problems viewers face when encountering a straight (no-monkey-business) show. All news shows, in a sense, are re-creations in that what we hear and see on them are attempts to represent actual events, and are not the events themselves. Perhaps, to avoid ambiguity, we might call all news shows “re-presentations” instead of “re-creations.” These re-presentations come to us in two forms: language and pictures. The question then arises: what do viewers have to know about language and pictures in order to be properly armed to defend themselves against the seductions of eloquence (to use B).

Let us take language first. Below are three principles that, in our opinion, are an essential part of the analytical equipment a viewer must bring to any encounter with a news show.

1. Whatever anyone says something is, it isn’t.
This sounds more complex - and maybe more pretentious - than it actually is. What it means is that there is a difference between the world of events and the world of words about events. The job of an honest reporter is to try to find words, and the appropriate tone in presenting, them that will come as close to evoking the event as possible. But since no two people will use exactly the same words to describe an event, we must acknowledge that for every verbal description of an event, there are multiple possible alternatives. You may demonstrate this to your own satisfaction by writing a two-paragraph description of a dinner you had with at least two other people, then asking the others who were present if each of them would also write, independently, a two-paragraph description of the “same” dinner. We should be very surprised if all of the descriptions include the same words, in the same order, emphasize the same things, and express the same feelings. In other words, “the dinner itself” is largely a nonverbal event. The words people use to describe this event are not the event itself and are only abstracted re-presentations of the event. What does this mean for a television viewer? It means that the viewer must never assume that the words spoken on a television news show are exactly what happened. Since there are so many alternative ways of describing what happened, the viewer must be on guard against assuming that he or she has heard “the absolute truth.”

2. Language operates at various levels of abstraction.
This means that there is a level of language whose purpose is to describe an event. There is also a level of language whose purpose is to evaluate an event. Even more, there is a level of language whose purpose is to infer what is unknown on the basis of what is known. The usual way to make these distinctions clear is through sentences such as the following three:

Manny Freebus is 5’8” and weighs 235 pounds.
Manny Freebus is grossly fat.

Manny Freebus eats too much.
The first sentence may be said to be language as pure description. It involves no judgments and no inferences. The second sentence is a description of sorts, but is mainly a judgment that the speaker makes of the “event” known as Manny Freebus. The third sentence is an inference based on observations the speaker has made. It is, in fact, a statement about the unknown based on the known. As it happens, we know Manny Freebus and can tell you that the eats no more than the average person but suffers from a glandular condition which keeps him overweight. Therefore, anyone who concluded from observing Manny’s shape that he eats too much has made a false inference. A good guess, but false nonetheless.
You can watch television news programs from now until doomsday and never come across any statement about Manny Freebus. But you will constantly come across the three kinds of statements we have been discussing - descriptions, judgments, and inferences. And it is important for a viewer to distinguish among them. For example,
you might hear an anchor introduce a story by saying: “Today Congress ordered an investigation of the explosive issue of whether Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaign made a deal with Iran in 1980 to delay the release of American hostages until after the election.” This statement is, of course, largely descriptive, but includes the judgmental word “explosive” as part of the report. We need hardly point out that what is explosive to one person may seem trivial to another. We do not say that the news writer has no business to include his or her judgment of this investigation. We do say that the viewer has to be aware that a judgment has been made. In fact, even the phrase “made a deal” (why not “arranged with Iran”?) has a somewhat sleazy connotation that implies a judgment of sorts. If, in the same news report, we are told that the evidence for such a secret deal is weak and that only an investigation with subpoena power can establish the truth, we must know that we have left the arena of factual language and have moved into the land of inference. An investigation with subpoena power may be a good idea but whether or not it can establish the truth is a guess on the journalist’s part, and a viewer ought to know that.

3. *Almost all words have connotative meanings.*

This suggests that even when attempting to use purely descriptive language, a journalist cannot avoid expressing an attitude about what he or she is saying. For example, here is the opening sentence of an anchor’s report about national examinations: “For the first time in the nation’s history, high-level education policymakers have designed the elements for a national examination system similar to the one advocated by President Bush.” This sentence certainly looks like it is pure description although it is filled with ambiguities. Is this the first time is our history that this has been done? Or only the first time that high-level education policymakers have done it? Or is it the first time something has been designed that is similar to what the President has advocated? But let us put those questions aside. (After all, there are limits to how analytical one ought to be.) Instead, we might concentrate on such words as “high-level,” “policymakers,” and “designed.” Speaking for ourselves, we are by no means sure that we know what a “high-level policymaker” is, although it sounds awfully impressive. It is certainly better then a “low-level policymaker,” although how one would distinguish between the two is a bit of a mystery. Come to think of it, a low-level “policymaker” must be pretty good, too, since anyone who makes policy must be important. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that what was done was “designed.” To design something usually implies careful thought, preparation, organization, and coherence. People design buildings, bridges, and furniture. If your experience has been anything like ours, you will know that reports are almost never designed; they are usually “thrown together,” and it is quite a compliment to say that a report was designed. The journalist who paid this compliment was certainly entitled to do it even though he may not have been aware of what he was doing. He probably thought he had made a simple description, avoiding any words that would imply favor or disfavor. But if so, he was defeated in his effort because language tends to be emotion-laden. Because it is people who do the talking, the talk almost always includes a feeling, an attitude, a judgment. In a sense, every language contains the history of a people’s feelings about the world. Our words are baskets of emotion. Smart journalists, of course know this. And so do smart audiences. Smart audiences don’t blame anyone for this state of affairs. They are, however, prepared for it.

Now we must turn to the problem of pictures. It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Maybe so. But it is probably equally true that one word is worth a thousand pictures, at least sometimes - for example, when it comes to understanding the world we live in. Indeed, the whole problem with news on television comes down to this: all the words uttered in an hour of news coverage could be printed on one page of a newspaper. And the world cannot be understood in one page. Of course, there is a compensation: television offers pictures, and the pictures move. Moving pictures are a kind of language in themselves, but the language of pictures differs radically from oral and written language, and the differences are crucial for understanding television news. To begin with, pictures, especially single pictures, speak only in particularities. Their vocabulary is limited to concrete representation. Unlike words and sentence, a picture does not present to us an idea or concept about the world, except as we use language itself to convert the image to idea. By itself, a picture cannot deal with the unseen, the remote, the internal, the abstract. It does not speak of “man,” only of a man; not of “tree,” only of a tree. You cannot produce an image of “nature,” any more than an image of “the sea.” You can only show a particular fragment of the here-and-now - a cliff of a certain terrain, in a certain condition of light; a wave at a moment in time, from a particular point of view. And just as “nature” and “the sea” cannot be photographed, such larger abstractions as truth, honor, love, and falsehood cannot be talked about in the lexicon of individual pictures. For “showing of” and “talking about” are two very different kinds of processes: individual pictures give us the world as object; language, the world as idea. There is no such thing in nature as “man” or “tree.” The universe offers no such categories or simplifications; only flux and infinite variety. The picture documents and celebrates
the particularities of the universe’s infinite variety. Language makes them comprehensible.
Of course, moving pictures, video with sound, may bridge the gap by juxtaposing images, symbols, sound, and music. Such images can present emotions and rudimentary ideas. They can suggest the panorama of nature and the joys and miseries of humankind, such as smoke pouring from the window or an ambulance racing to a hospital.

Nonetheless, keep in mind that when terrorists want to prove to the world that their kidnap victims are still alive, they photograph them holding a copy of a recent newspaper. The dateline on the newspaper provides the proof that the photograph was taken on or after that date. Without the help of the written word, film and videotape cannot portray temporal dimensions (time) with any precision. Consider a film clip showing an aircraft carrier at sea. If there is a flag, one might be able to identify the ship as Soviet or American but there would be no way of telling where in the world the carrier was, where it was headed, or when the pictures were taken. It is only through language - words spoken over the pictures or reproduced in them - that the image of the aircraft carrier takes on specific meaning.

This leads to an important point about the language of pictures. Moving pictures favor images that change. That is why violence and dynamic destruction find their way onto television so often. When something is destroyed violently it is altered in a highly visible way; hence the entrancing power of fire. Fire gives visual form to the ideas of consumption, disappearance, death - the thing that burned is actually taken away by fire. It is at this very basic level that fires make a good subject for television news. Something was here, now it’s gone, and the change is recorded on film.

Those who produce television news in America know that their medium favors images that move. That is why they are wary of “talking heads,” people who simply appear in front of a camera and speak. When talking heads appear on television, there is nothing to record or document, no change in process. In the cinema the situation is somewhat different. On a movie screen, close-ups of a good actor speaking dramatically can sometimes be interesting to watch. When Clint Eastwood narrows his eyes and challenges his rival to shoot first, the spectator sees the cool rage of the Eastwood character take visual form, and the narrowing of the eyes is dramatic.

While the form of a news broadcast emphasizes tidiness and control, its content can best be described as fragmented. Because time is so precious on television, because the nature of the medium favors dynamic visual images, and because the pressures of a commercial structure require the news to hold its audience above all else, there is rarely any attempt to explain issues in depth or place events in their proper context. The news moves nervously from a warehouse fire to a court decision, from a guerrilla war to World Cup match, the quality of the film most often determining the length of the story. Certain stories show up only because they offer dramatic pictures. Bleachers collapse in South America: hundreds of people are crushed - a perfect television news story, for the cameras can record the face of disaster in all its anguish. Back in Washington, a new budget is approved by Congress. Here there is nothing to photograph because a budget is not a physical event; it is a document full of language and numbers. So the producers of the news will show a photo of the document itself, focusing on the cover where it says “Budget of the United States of America.” Or sometimes they will send a camera crew to the government printing plant where copies of the budget are produced. That evening, while the contents of the budget are summarized by a voice-over, the viewer sees stacks of documents being loaded into boxes at the government printing plant. Then a few of the budget’s more important provisions will be flashed on the screen in written form, but this is such a time-consuming process -using television as a printed page - that the producers keep it to minimum. In short, the budget is not televisable, and for that reason its time on the news must be brief. The bleacher collapse will get more time that evening.

The nature of journalism in general to concentrate on the surface of events rather than underlying conditions; this is as true for the newspaper, a TV newscast, or online news. But several features of television make it more pronounced. One is that a television broadcast is a series of events that occur in sequence, and the sequence is the same for all viewers. This is not true for a newspaper page, which displays many items simultaneously, allowing reader to choose the order in which they read them. If newspaper reader want only a summary of the latest tax bill, they can read the headline and the first paragraph of an article, and if they want more, they can keep reading. In a sense, then, everyone reads a different newspaper, for no two readers will read (or ignore) the same items. But all television viewers see the same broadcast. They have no choices. A report is either in the broadcast or out, which means that anything which is of narrow interest is unlikely to be included. The need to “include everyone,” an identifying feature of commercial television in all its forms, prevents
journalists from offering lengthy or complex explanations, or from tracing the sequence of events leading up to today’s headlines. One of the ironies of political life in modern democracies is that many problems which concern the “general welfare” are interest only to specialized groups. Arms control, for example, is an issue that literally concerns everyone in the world, and yet the language of arms control and the complexity of the subject are so daunting that only a minority of people can actually follow the issue from week to week and month to month. If it wants to act responsibly a newspaper can at least make available more information about arms control then most people want. Commercial television cannot afford to do so.

But even if commercial television could afford to do so, it wouldn’t. the fact that television news is principally made up of moving pictures prevents it from offering lengthy, coherent explanations of events. A television news show reveals the world as a series of unrelated, fragmentary moments. It does not -and cannot be expected to- offer a sense of coherence or meaning. What does this suggest to a TV viewer? That the viewer must come with a prepared mind -information, opinions, a sense of proportion, an articulate value system. To the TV viewer lacking such mental equipment, a news program is only a kind of rousing light show. Here a falling building, there a five-alarm fire, everywhere the world as an object, much without meaning, connections, or continuity.