



Play It, Sam - Again, And Again, And Again

Peter Putnis, *Displaced, Re-cut and Recycled: File-tape in Television News*, Centre For Journalism Research and Education, Bond University, 1994. ISBN 0 7331 0005 8. 148 pp. \$30

This study, whose title describes the process of reconstruction of events using file footage, argues that image recycling has become a basic routine of television news production.

The study, by Bond University academic Peter Putnis, explores the role that library file footage plays in the construction of television news stories. File tape is defined as footage that is used in a story which was not filmed specifically for that story.

The study uses a combination of observation of television newsroom practice and textual analysis of news stories. It describes how images are taken out of the contexts which gave them meaning, edited to suit new purposes and to support new meanings and, once broadcast in reconstituted form, returned to the newsroom library for reclassification and possible later use.

The study contains a useful summary of previous major American, English, Canadian and Australian studies on newsroom practice, and on television news as a cultural artefact which constructs realities using dominant story themes and ideologically based frames of reference.

Previous studies identified the increasing significance of the visual imperative in television news in the 1980s compared to the 1960s and 1970s, but none considered the use of file tape or the role of the newsroom library in any detail. The author argues that the increased use of file footage raises issues central to the credibility of television news, and claims that this study is the first to provide an analysis and evaluation of the role of file tape in news construction.

Analysis of Network News

The data on which the study is based was obtained by analysing the domestic news stories shown on the major evening bulletins of Brisbane's Channels 2, 7, 9 and 10 during the period 9 - 22 August 1993. The news directors of each station were interviewed and the operation of the news libraries and their use was observed and described.

Of 500 domestic news stories, 260 or 52 per cent used file-tape. The figures for each channel are ABC - 69 per cent, Seven - 46.5 per cent, Nine - 45.5 per cent, Ten - 47 per cent. These proportions were significantly higher than the estimates given by the news directors.

The significantly higher proportion of file tape use on the ABC is explained by the fact that there is greater emphasis on politics, and on economic, business and indus-

trial stories which do not generate much actuality footage and require additional visual material.

Further statistics are given for the number of segments and sources of file tape used, and the total proportion of visuals made up of file tape. In the majority of cases, the presence of file tape is not indicated by the use of supers (ABC - 31 per cent, 7 - 40 per cent, 9 - 36 per cent, 10 - 27 per cent). There is also an analysis of the relationship between the subject and central structural feature of news stories (for example, interview, court report, press conference or announcement) and use of file-tape.

File Tape Can Be Key Element

The parts of the study concerning the analysis of the functions of file-tape and its relation to news values and ways of seeing are particularly revealing. While the general view of news directors and journalists is that file-tape is a second-best option which can be dangerous, the study reveals that in many cases, file tape is a key element of the story.

Although file-tape has the capacity to enhance news values such as narrative strength, conflict, dramatisation, personalisation and continuity, it is more often used in superficial and careless ways at the expense of information quality, clarity and relevance. In one example, a story on an American court ruling about the liability of CSR for asbestosis contracted by shipyard workers was accompanied by shots of an abandoned town, people meeting and showing emotion, a coffin being carried and a funeral. None of the images was identified as file-tape or by date or location. Images of a funeral that had once been specific to particular people in particular circumstances were now being used in a generic way with little regard for accuracy or precision.

In another example, the news event was a meeting between the education minister and parents' groups which had been described by the parties as cordial and productive. Unidentified file-tape of a demonstration by teachers that had taken place the previous week accompanied the story. The author argues that the file-tape engendered conflict in an otherwise consensual situation and marginalised the teachers, who were depicted as protesting while the other parties met. Viewers who had not been following the issue may have been misled into thinking that the protest had happened that day.

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Tape Can Reinforce Stereotypes

In a chapter entitled *Ways of Seeing*, Putnis argues that file-tape images function ideologically to construct a status hierarchy among those represented, suggest preferred readings of a situation, reinforce stereotyped ways of seeing situations and groups such as the unemployed, pensioners and Aborigines, and help sustain standard television news narratives.

The author says that there is significant evidence of a visual symbolic code of television news that is sustained by the use of file-tape in a manner that reinforces stereotypical ways of seeing. Similarly, file-tape establishes and sustains certain standard narratives, such as 'unions in opposition', 'poor pensioners' and 'crime waves'.

Putnis cites as an example the numerous stories on the land claim by the Wik people over land on which Comalco holds mining leases. Out of 24 stories, 21 used footage of company activities such as mining, smelting, transporting and exporting, the impression being that such activities are vital to the economy but under threat by the land claim. The Wik people were either not represented at all or were notionally represented by unrelated stereotypical images that contrasted poorly with the positive impression of Comalco's industrious activities.

The author draws two major conclusions about the use of file tape.

The first is that it diminishes information quality and reduces the potential to generate understanding by introducing irrelevant ways of seeing, simulating news events and confusing time and place.

The second conclusion is that particular classes of events or groups of people are subject to systematic bias or misrepresentation. The short period of the survey was sufficient to demonstrate systematic misrepresentation of Aborigines through misuse of a limited repertoire of file-tape images stripped of context, identities and occasion. For example, images of an Aboriginal demonstration in Perth were used to illustrate an story about Aborigines in Queensland, although there was no connection between the file tape and the current story. Aborigines are otherwise typically portrayed as passive, aimless and indolent.

In his concluding comments, the author argues that the manner in which file tape is used by the networks considered in the study threatens the credibility and integrity of television news in Australia.

This monograph is a useful addition to the literature on the construction of reality and reinforcement of stereotypes and standard narratives by television news. It engenders in the reader a greater sense of awareness of how television news is constructed, and of the fact that everything which appears on the screen is not actuality and may not even be relevant. Putnis's acknowledgment of the limitations on the pronouncements that can be made on the basis of a two week sample of news stories suggests that there is scope for further work in this area. □

Jenny Mullaly

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1967	5 cents	1983	30 cents
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1971	7 cents	1987	50 cents
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