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# Direct address and television news-reading: Discourse, technology and changing cultural form in Chinese and western TV news



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## ABSTRACT

The way in which television news-readers look to their audience is the realization of a particular mode of visual direct address that has been identified more generally as characteristic of television as a medium. This mode of address, however, is not uniform across institutions, or unchanging over time, but is a distinctive kind of practical accomplishment, dependent – in part at least – on the technological developments around the autocue or teleprompter. This article explores how the introduction of the autocue altered practices of television news-reading, and – by enabling a greater degree of expressive release by newsreaders – fostered a stronger sense of para-social interaction between newsreader and audience. These developments, however, are not simply driven by technology but interact with cultural and institutional pressures which we illustrate by comparisons between British (BBC), U.S. (CBS) and Chinese (CCTV) news presenters. Indeed, the adoption of and development of direct visual address in news reading, with accompanying forms of expressive release, may ultimately be seen as fulfilling a general communicative principle: *“for mediated communication at a distance, favour directness over indirectness, informality over formality, and social solidarity over social distance.”*

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## 1. Introduction

We live in a period of unprecedented innovation and change in the technologies of communication. The pace of change is rapid; and we can see it most obviously in the changing character of the physical devices that we use on an everyday basis to communicate with each other. Less obvious, perhaps, but deeply significant, are attendant changes in the communicative forms of everyday life. Following Fairclough, we might refer to some of these changes – especially in forms of public communication – as trends in the “conversationalisation” and “informalisation of discourse” (Fairclough, 1994). Such trends, of course, though particularly salient in the current period, have a longer history and trajectory than Fairclough notes, as we can see in the work of scholars from a range of disciplines and perspectives. For instance, in stylistics Biber and Finegan (1989) detect a long-term trend towards more oral styles in writing from the 16th to the 19th century. In addition, much work on forms of address in the historical sociolinguistics of European languages (e.g. Friedrich, 1972) seems to confirm a trend towards informality during the modern period (often associated with the increased “egalitarianism of modern life” – see Spolsky, 1998). This trend is borne out by Pan and

Kádár's historical study of politeness in China (2011) where they note a shift from “honorific rich” to “honorific poor” address terms. As regards news presentation itself, Thøgersen (2016) notes a move towards vernacularisation in news reading Denmark. And, indeed, from the wider perspective of cultural analysis, Wouters (2011) sees an overall trend to informalisation not just in language, but in manners and etiquette more generally, from the 19th to the 20th centuries in Europe. So a broader and longer purview seems to suggest a widespread tendency towards what we might generally designate informalisation in writing, in language more generally, and in overall manners and etiquette.

Alongside this, however, we must also note Norbert Elias's work (1996) on the civilizing process in Europe which suggests that under the influences of state formation in the early modern and modern periods there may be formalizing or re-formalizing tendencies that run counter to those of informalisation. For him at least, the direction of change is not necessarily always and only in one direction.

Broadcast news as a configuration of public genres is an important site for the observation and study of these trends. It is a pervasive and significant generic complex of public discourse, a major source of information about the world for very large populations, widely dispersed in recognizably similar institutional forms across many societies, of relatively recent provenance, and one which in this digital age has become a matter of public record, thus

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making it increasingly accessible for systematic research. It is with some surprise, therefore, that we note how little sustained attention it has received in its own right from discourse analysts, critical or otherwise, stylisticians, or corpus linguists. For while there is a large body of work devoted to analyzing newspaper discourse (Alba-Juez, 2017; Conboy, 2010; van Dijk, 1988; Richardson, 2006; Bednarek, 2006; Bednarek and Caple, 2017; Fowler, 1991), until recently there has been only one major study of the discourse of broadcast news (Montgomery, 2007). And yet, of course, the discourse genres of broadcast news are nothing if not *sui generis*. They are, for sure, quite distinct from those of print journalism, as Montgomery (2007) makes clear.

But while broadcast news genres may be less easy to study than those of print journalism (since they need to be recorded and transcribed before systematic linguistic research can even begin), and while they thus may seem ephemeral by comparison with print, their reach and influence in the digital age is still as yet far wider than newspapers or the internet. For instance, TV is still the top news source for most Americans (57%, as opposed to 38% for online sources; 25% for radio and 20% for print newspapers) (Pew Research Center, 2016). Likewise, the daily audience for China Central Television's (CCTV) evening news bulletin *Xinwen Liانبō* ('News Simulcast') is in the region of 135 million, making it not just the most watched news programme in China but attracting the largest audience in the world.

Indeed, journalism in the round, as "the textual system of modernity" (Hartley, 1996), and television news in particular, offers precisely the site at which technological innovation and evolution in communicative form engage with each other in a most intense way. Television news has always presented itself as the pre-eminent vehicle for providing the most up-to-date and, through its visual presentation, the most immediate and epistemologically persuasive version of on-going events in the world at large of any medium (Ekström, 2002). And this underlying stance has driven many kinds of technological developments in television news – for example those of Electronic News Gathering (ENG) and Satellite News Gathering (SNG) (MacGregor, 1997), as well as other developments such as computer-generated studio sets and graphics. These developments have interacted with changes in communicative form in many ways – a simple case, for example, being the increasing use of the live two-way in BBC news around the turn of the century enabled by developments in ENG and SNG.

So, for the purposes of this paper, we wish to explore some of the interactions between technology and cultural-discursive form in more detail by exploring the impact of one kind of technological development, the teleprompter or autocue, on the news presenter's habitual televisual mode of address.

To claim a connection between changing technologies of communication and cultural form is not new of course. The impact of writing or print communication on culture has been extensively explored by, among others, McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), Goody and Watt in *The Consequences of Literacy* (1963), by Eisenstein in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979) and by Ong in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word* (1982). In the main, however, these studies explore how changes in culture and society may be attendant upon the introduction of writing or print. Less attention has been devoted to what may be seen as a reversal of this process – the way newer technologies of communication, especially since the introduction of broadcasting, and, since then, into the digital age, have re-accentuated the oral.

In these respects, therefore, television news makes a particularly interesting case study of the interactions between technology and discursive form over time. Television news relies upon script in varying ways – as an antecedent or precursor text, for instance, or as a supplement – for parts of its production. At the same time,

however, it places a high premium upon live, improvised and extempore spoken delivery (Montgomery, 1999). On the one hand, broadcast news as discourse faces enormous institutional pressures to be accurate, impartial, and authoritative. On the other hand, like all broadcasting, it remains in constant search of its audience, for whom it needs to be lively and engaging. The tensions between these alternative pressures are evident in the medley of genres (from univocal to polyvocal) that make up bulletin news which – depending on the broadcaster – may include news presentation, news reports from the field, news interviews, live-two way interviews, and panel discussion (see Montgomery, 2007). They are also evident in the practice of news presentation itself (or as it is sometimes known, 'news-casting' or 'news-reading') which is almost universally scripted, but delivered in recent times as if directly to the audience without apparent reference to a script.

Our analytical approach to this practice has roots in linguistics (discourse analysis) but has a particular concern to map change in discursive form over time, while recognizing that discursive form in television is nothing if not embodied in an oral-aural-visual experience, and that the projection of that embodiment to the audience is enabled by a complex array of technological affordances.

Accordingly, while our starting point may be in linguistics, our real goal is to sketch in a preliminary fashion the interactions between television, technology and cultural (discursive) form (Williams, 1974/2003) over time as a process of historical change.

To this goal we add one other dimension – some suggestive comparisons between different cultures and broadcasting systems, including Chinese, British and North American. For while the televisual experience is first and foremost one of projected embodiment, and while the technologies of television are highly congruent wherever they are in use, the cultural context in which they are embedded, socially and institutionally, can be very different.

China, in particular, provides a very revealing case. Emerging from a long period of social upheaval during the cultural revolution era, into Deng Xiaoping's opening up, Chinese television, like its economy more generally, has undergone a very rapid period of change, one which we will try and trace for the presentation of television news alongside western examples in what follows.

### 1.1. The data for this study

As noted earlier (p.3), broadcast news is relatively ephemeral and – partly for this very reason – it has received markedly less attention than the news produced by print institutions (or more recently by their related online digital providers). Archives of print news such as the British Library's British Newspaper Archive, or Lexis Nexis, are relatively easy to access for diachronic work in print news. However, by comparison, in Britain, at least, we are not aware of any large-scale longitudinal data bases or archives of broadcast news of reasonable historical depth with the possible exception of *Box of Broadcasts*,<sup>1</sup> which is licensed for educational institutions in the U.K. and which can provide news coverage back to 1990. In the U.S., Vanderbilt University's Television News Archive is also a helpful development, but it is limited to U.S. broadcasters and, although its data stretches back to 1968, there are costs for individual scholars to access it. It is most likely for this reason that, in relation to contemporary (rather than historical) work on broadcast news, researchers have tended to record their own data, off-air, over a limited time-period. Indeed, it was this approach that underpinned Montgomery's study of the Discourse of Broadcast News (2007); and the same practice has in part underpinned the current study where

<sup>1</sup> *Box of Broadcasts*: <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand>.

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