This article explores a fairly recent trend in cable programming: "drive-by programming." In response to the proliferation of channels and the potential for channel surfing that has accompanied the narrowcasting of contemporary cable television, some networks have regularly employed a programming scheme that directly targets the roving viewer. Looking at MTV, TNT, and CNN, this article examines the ways in which this new programming scheme has impacted both programming choices and program content, including MTV's movement to reality television and the repetitive story-telling practices of both TNT and CNN. These case studies demonstrate the consequences of drive-by programming for the contemporary media environment, illustrating the particularly detrimental effects of CNN's drive-by practices on the kinds of news stories the network tells.

Media technologies both regulate and respond to the patterns of everyday life. The telegraph, in conjunction with the railroad, played a vital role in establishing a standard concept of time within the United States. Before the establishment of a uniform standard time, communities relied on the sun for their sense of temporality. As a result, each community had a particular sense of local time that differed in small but important ways from that of other communities. Around the mid-19th century, telegraphic transmissions of time signals were used to compare times at different points in space, establishing a sense of "true time" that helped maintain more consistent railroad schedules and avoid collisions between trains operating from different locales (Bartky, 2000; Carey, 1989). Here, telegraphy helped to regulate people's experience of time and thus the temporal patterns through which they moved through their lives.

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Similarly, television programming and television technologies have historically regulated and responded to the life patterns of audience members. The notion of program "flow," in which networks craft a distinctive line-up of related programs in order to win an evening of viewers, dominated during the pre-cable broadcasting era (Williams, 1975). Borrowing a broadcasting model from radio, the big three networks included programs aimed at a variety of age and interest groups, hoping to get their piece of America’s collective television audience. If they got viewers watching, these early programmers believed, they would keep watching, the collection of programs fashioned together more important than any single program. Here, broadcasters sought to create ritualized viewing patterns that would bring in viewers night after night via a broadcasting model still in use by today’s major networks (e.g. NBC’s Thursday night “Must See TV”). Departing from this programming model, niche-marketing approaches arose in the 1980s as cable allowed such contemporary networks as Lifetime, ESPN, and the Discovery Channel to target more specific demographic groups and audiences, just as niche-marketing practices were used still earlier by magazine publishers and radio broadcasters. Instead of trying to reach all viewers, these networks have decided that they are better off targeting a specific segment of the population, allowing viewers to satisfy very particular interests and giving advertisers access to a more specific audience demographic.

This article explores another recent trend in cable programming: drive-by programming. Rather than compete with the major networks’ programming practices, networks such as TNT, MTV, and CNN have regularly employed programming schemas that target the channel surfer, hoping to pull in viewers as they zap from one channel to another. If a broadcasting model of programming is dominated by the concept of seriality—in which the serial-episode format of programs works to bring in and hold viewers night after night—and the narrowcasting model is dominated by the concept of specificity—in which individual networks construct specific programming packages for selected audiences—then drive-by programming is dominated by the concept of repeatability. TNT’s practice of showing the same movie for several nights in a row or multiple times throughout the day, illustrates drive-by programming in practice, the network’s viewers encouraged to piece together a film through multiple drive-bys. MTV’s movement away from music videos and toward reality shows such as Real World illustrates a similar impulse, the network here using a story arc not possible in music videos to draw in passing viewers. Finally, as a 24-hour news network, CNN’s success depends on its ability to manage repeatability. Because the network tells the same stories throughout the day it must employ particular narrative devices to both draw in new audience members and maintain the interest of repeat viewers.

Because drive-by programming focuses on these roving viewers, it violates many of the practices of traditional broadcast networks. Whereas traditional broadcast programming ritualizes viewing practices through consistent, segmented schedules, the chaotic, repetitious scheduling of drive-by programming keeps viewers off guard, seemingly disallowing this kind of ritual viewing. Through both their scheduling practices and their program content TNT, MTV, and CNN emphasize a sense of uncertainty that aims at grabbing the attention of passersby.
Rather than ritually bringing in viewers at established times, drive-by programming keeps viewers guessing, hoping to lure them to the channel in the midst of their channel surfing. At the same time, however, these same networks also emphasize a kind of familiarity. Whether programming well-known movies or reiterating particular cultural stereotypes, these networks utilize familiar story arcs and ideological values in an attempt to hold viewers’ attention once they get them watching.

Taken as a whole, drive-by programming illustrates the complex relationship between media technologies, cultural practices, and programming strategies. Innovations in cable television technologies, the subsequent explosion of cable channels, and the development of the remote control have opened the possibility for the cultural practice of channel surfing. Drive-by programming demonstrates one response to this particular media climate. Through repeatability, uncertainty, and familiarity, “second-choice networks” such as TNT, MTV, and CNN seek to negotiate the world of the channel surfer. The multiple implications and effects of these programming practices are particularly disturbing in the case of CNN, which enacts uncertainty and fear as a way of pulling in passing viewers while reiterating familiar middle-American stereotypes and ideologies in the framing of its various news stories.

WATCHING JAWS FOR THE 12TH TIME: REPLACING SERIALITY WITH REPEATABILITY ON TNT

In “The Fact of Television” Stanley Cavell (1984) discusses the importance of seriality to the aesthetics of television. According to Cavell, whereas film art “is the business of individual works,” the art of television “is not primarily the individual work, but the program, the format, not this or that day of I Love Lucy, but the program as such” (p. 239). Owing to this difference, “it is not the same narrative matter for Frankenstein to get a bride as for Rhoda (in a popular television show a few years ago bearing her name) to get a husband. The former is a drama on its own; the latter serves a history, a before and after” (p. 245). Whether looking at soap opera, nighttime drama, or the situation comedy the importance of this distinction seems clear. Whereas a particular episode of the X-Files may have had a self-contained narrative with a beginning, middle, and an end, it would be silly to ignore its place within the larger narrative of the series. For this reason, Cavell suggests, the fact of television is the experience of the series. Viewers turn to NBC at 8 p.m. on Thursdays to see another piece of the larger Friends story.

In this way, the serial format of television serves to ritualize and regiment time as well, an important element of broadcast programming. As Cavell (1984) explains:

Not only does an hour signify something in television time that has no bearing on film time, but it is internal to the establishment of its formats that television obeys the rhythm, perhaps even celebrates the articulations, the recurrences, of the order of the week, as does Genesis. The way in which it celebrates this, by further dividing and repeating the day in terms of minutes and seconds, would be a function of television’s establishment in industrialized societies, with their regimentation of time. (pp. 263-264)
Indeed, broadcast television time is strictly regimented around the concept of the series. Episodes of each series are played at regular intervals that are well known to the viewer. Together, strings of various episodes, along with their accompanying commercial breaks, make up the daily flow of much commercial television. Programmers for the major networks, where seriality is most dominant, are inclined to talk about the importance of this or that time slot and to strategize the relationships between shows in a particular night of viewing (will viewers be more willing to watch a new program if it is placed between *Will and Grace* and *ER*?). This has been the dominant model of broadcasting since the establishment of serials on radio.

The advent of cable, however, has changed some of these established conventions of broadcast practice. In discussing his preference for producing movies for cable networks, and TNT in particular, producer Roger Gimbel illustrates these differences clearly:

The commercial networks spend all their efforts promoting the first showing of a movie, not the second. Because their movies have to be timely and so-called "high concept," repeatability is not their first concern. On cable, however, repeatability is very important—they don’t have a regular primetime schedule, so everything gets shown again and again. (Adler, 1990, p. 54)

Gimbel celebrates this repeatability because, in his words, it allows for more complex characterizations than are possible when a movie is only viewed once, as is the case on the major networks. Indeed, TNT’s emphasis on repeatability and its lack of a regular prime-time schedule allow the channel to experiment with other programming formats that vary from the more conventional strategies of the networks. Such variations make up the basis for drive-by programming.

Even a cursory look at TNT’s schedule illustrates the importance of repeatability and this avoidance of strictly ritualized scheduling to their programming strategies. During weekdays, and weeknights TNT is primarily a rerun channel and as such depends on the previous success and thus repeatability of other networks’ programs. Although TNT’s daily reruns, which currently include such successes as *Law & Order*, *ER*, and *NYPD Blue*, show regularly throughout the day and evening, this scheduling still violates the sense of regimented, ritualized time that seems so important to the broadcast networks. For Monday, November 11 and Tuesday, November 12, 2002 for instance, TNT’s evening line-up included five consecutive hours of *Law & Order*, running from 7 p.m. to midnight. The following Monday, November 18, repeated this schedule. But if viewers got the sense that this was TNT’s regular schedule, they would have been slightly surprised on the following Tuesday, November 19. Here, *Law & Order* ran from 7 to 10 p.m.; then, an episode of *Charmed* showed up at 10 p.m., followed again by *Law & Order* in its “regular” 11 p.m. slot. Similarly, on Wednesday, November 13, TNT’s evening schedule had *Law & Order* at 7 p.m., followed by the film *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* at 8 p.m. *Charmed* showed again at 10 p.m., followed by *Law & Order* at 11 p.m. The next Wednesday, November 20, returned *Law & Order* to the 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. time slots, followed by the film *Jaws* at 9 p.m. and another showing of *Law & Order* at 11:45 p.m.
If this is confusing, it is meant to be. This confusion and this departure from more conventionally regimented network schedules are central to the strategies of cable programming to which TNT subscribes. With traditional broadcasting, the schedule is a contract between the network and the viewer. There, the schedule is a ritualized, fixed entity from week to week. “Must See TV” always begins at 8 on Thursday night. Fans of hit programs such as Friends plan to watch them at their regularly scheduled, ritualized time, just as advertisers pay for a particular time slot, not merely a program. But smaller networks such as TNT lack the resources to compete with the prime-time programs of the bigger networks. Whereas NBC’s schedule is meant to ritually bring in viewers at 8 every Thursday night, TNT’s constantly evolving scheduling intends to catch the attention of the passing viewer who likely has no idea what is showing until he or she tunes in. NBC’s regular schedule aims at a set of ritualized viewers. TNT’s chaotic schedule practically precludes this kind of viewership. Who could keep track of a schedule that changes from day to day and week to week seemingly without any organizing logic?

That TNT sees this chaotic scheduling as a way of dealing with competition from the bigger networks is clear by looking at an exception to this chaotic programming schedule, TNT’s successful original program Witchblade. This show garnered high ratings and proved tough competition for the other networks. Rather than being programmed throughout the day, Witchblade held a regular prime-time slot of 9 p.m. on Tuesday nights, making the network’s otherwise chaotic programming strategy all the more clear. When TNT has a program that can compete with the networks, it schedules it in a conventional, ritualized way. When it doesn’t, TNT must be content to target the moving viewer who may happen to stumble across the program in his or her journey from one network to another. TNT’s recent addition of sports programming that has traditionally been seen on the more conventionally programmed networks (e.g., NBA basketball, NASCAR) might seem to suggest TNT’s own movement toward conventional programming strategies. Rather, sports are one of the few kinds of drive-by programs that broadcast networks program into their line-ups. Indeed, the tendency of sports programs to run outside their scheduled time slots often causes problems for the networks that have traditionally shown them. For TNT, this simply reinforces the otherwise chaotic nature of their scheduling practices.

In addition to TNT’s storehouse of syndicated television serials, TNT also regularly shows movies. Both on the weekends and at various times on weeknights, TNT presents Hollywood films that have been released into syndication. During the weekend beginning Friday night, November 15, 2002 for instance, TNT’s line-up included four showings of The Thomas Crown Affair, two showings each of Interview with a Vampire, First Knight, Boys on the Side, The Other Sister, Cocktail, Born on the Fourth of July, When Harry Met Sally, and one showing each of Love Affair, The Color of Money, Sleepless in Seattle, and The Bachelor. As with TNT’s weeknight programming, which likewise places movies at various times in the evening schedule, this irregular programming of movies throughout the weekend disregards any sense of ritualized viewing times in favor of a more chaotic, free-floating schedule. Although such movie schedules were introduced
earlier by HBO, because TNT relies on advertising revenue this chaotic repetition serves a different purpose on this network. If the tactic works, viewers should find themselves stumbling onto *Interview with a Vampire* when surfing through the channels and stick around to see their favorite scene.

In addition to these Hollywood films, TNT has also established itself through a series of original made-for-TV movies. Like their Hollywood counterparts, these films are generally repeated at various times throughout TNT's schedule, playing a role in the chaotic, drive-by feel of the network's lineup. *Monday Night Mayhem*, which told the story of the beginnings of Monday night football, and *Pirates of Silicon Valley*, which explored the successes and struggles of youthful Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, illustrate the strategic use of these made-for-TV movies. These two films, like others in the network's history, illustrate TNT's penchant for narrating "real-life events." That TNT would focus on such stories makes sense in the context of their larger programming strategies. On a network concerned as much about second viewing as the first and organized around the concept of repeatability it makes sense to focus on real-life events with which viewers should have some familiarity. Just as TNT generally shows well-known Hollywood movies that viewers are likely to have seen before, so these made-for-TV movies depict events that viewers are likely to know. As viewers are encouraged to wait around to see their favorite scene from *Cocktail*, so are they encouraged to stop on the distinctive yellow jackets of *Monday Night Football* fame.

Taking these ideas together, it becomes clear how uncertainty and familiarity work as counterparts to repeatability. Because its chaotic schedule violates the ritualized schedule of other networks, TNT guarantees a certain kind of uncertainty about what may or may not be on the air. Yet, the kinds of programs TNT shows—well-known television reruns, popular Hollywood films, and made-for-TV movies of well-known events—guarantee a sort of familiarity as well. The act of repeating programs itself makes use of uncertainty to contribute to a sense of familiarity. If a movie is shown at various times throughout the schedule, viewers become more familiar with the program at each particular drive-by. Viewers become able to assemble the overall story through various repeated fragments. Such practices make clear the linkages between repeatability, uncertainty, and familiarity. Familiar shows provide familiar story arcs and narratives that, randomly dispersed throughout the schedule, draw in the roving viewer. When I stumble on *Jaws* or *When Harry Met Sally*, I quickly recognize my place in the larger narrative structure. I know whether the next big shark attack or Sally's publicly faked orgasm are coming up soon. If things go well for TNT, I'll stick around to see them and watch some advertisements in the process.

Repeatability thus offers alternatives to the seriality of conventional broadcast programming, using both uncertainty and familiarity to bring in viewers surfing through the various channels. This has implications both for how the viewer experiences the programs (as fragments assembled together randomly) and for the kinds of things that make it on the network, whether these are familiar, well-established television programs or movies, or made-for-TV movies of well-known events.
REALITY KILLED THE VIDEO STAR: FROM NARROWCASTING TO DRIVE-BY PROGRAMMING ON MTV

MTV’s brand of drive-by programming started differently than TNT’s because MTV began as a more properly “narrowcast” network. As an infant network, MTV’s founder, Robert Pittman, won advertisers through what he called “zero-based programming.” Rather than coming up with a concept to sell and then trying to find a market for it, Pittman and his people would find out what their audience wanted and then design a network around those wants (Pettegrew, 1992). MTV’s early sets reflected this clearly, with video jockeys (VJs) addressing the viewer from spaces that looked like a teenager’s bedroom, complete with concert posters, multicolored walls, and permanent clutter. These design ideas reflected the teen to 20-something audience that MTV sought to target, MTV’s marketers visiting real-life audience members’ houses and using them as models for their network. With its sequences of music videos, MTV gave advertisers a direct line to an important demographic market.

By 1985, however, MTV’s ratings began to slide. The music videos that had brought MTV into maturity were no longer pulling in the big numbers, sliding 27% from an average 24-hour rating of 1.1 in the first quarter of 1984 to one of .8 for the second quarter of 1985 (“MTV Gets Buy Out,” 1985). In 1986, Nielsen numbers showed MTV down to a rating of .7 (Farley & Vamos, 1986). In response, MTV began exploring alternative forms of programming. In 1988, MTV’s line-up included a new game show, Remote Control, as well as MTV’s Half-Hour Comedy Hour and Club MTV, a dance party program resembling American Bandstand. Finally, in 1989 MTV President John Reardon announced that MTV would move from videos to an almost all-show format (Duffy, 1990).

Longer shows, MTV’s executives had decided, should help keep viewers tuned in longer. Duffy, a Business Week analyst, explained at the time:

The strategy is to create shows around quirky but appealing personalities and get viewers to stay tuned longer. MTV viewers, inveterate channel-flippers, often seek out the channel as a second choice. “When they’re bored,” says top programmer Doug Herzog, “they zap over to check out MTV.” The problem is, they zap away just as readily. As a result, the channel draws an average 0.6%, or 300,000, of its 50.4 million U.S. subscribers at any given time—a so-so showing even by cable standards. (p. 62)

Thus, MTV began a marketing strategy to prevent viewers from zapping away from the network, replacing videos with the 30-minute and longer programs that still dominate the network today.

Even though these longer programs reflect the programming format of more traditionally programmed networks, MTV’s programming strategies differ in significant ways. Apparently continuing to see themselves as a “second-choice network,” MTV utilizes much of the drive-by programming strategies of TNT. Replacing traditional notions of seriality with repeatability, MTV utilizes a chaotic schedule that repeats programs at various and different times throughout the
week, making it virtually impossible to keep track of the network’s day-to-day line-up. On Tuesday November 12, 2002, for instance, the network showed five straight episodes of the *Real World* from 8 to 10:30 p.m. The next Tuesday, November 19, however, the network listed a series of videos from 8 to 9:30 p.m., followed by two episodes of the *Real World* at 9:30 and 10 pm. The network’s daytime programming is no less scattered and chaotic. To take but one of many examples, MTV’s 2 p.m. time slot listed a different program every day from Monday, November 11 to Monday, November 19, including *Suspect: True Crime Stories, Making the Movie, Making the Band, Fanography: Britney Spears, Becoming, FM Nation*, and *Real World*. Although traditional networks offer more ritualized schedules to bring in audience members at regimented time periods, MTV seems to violate any sense of ritualized time throughout. The only thing the MTV viewer can be sure of, it seems, is that he or she can never know exactly what will be playing at any particular time.

MTV’s movement to reality programs such as the *Real World, Road Rules*, and, more recently, *The Osbournes*, illustrates another strategy similar to that of TNT. Whereas music videos often meant low ratings because viewers would zap away from the channel as soon as it showed a video they didn’t like, reality programs such as *Real World* use narrative devices such as story arcs and suspense to keep viewers tuned in for longer periods of time. From the beginning of *Real World* the show’s producers clearly sought casts who would guarantee a high amount of drama and conflict. Whether bringing together out-of-the-closet homosexuals with raging homophobes or militant African Americans with outspoken racists, *Real World* producers used a supposed multicultural theme to ensure high drama and conflict for their program. When these conflicts began to run dry, producers concocted artificial problems by giving the houseguests various tasks to complete (e.g., running a radio station, working as life guards, operating a daycare center, creating a start-up business of their own). Such tasks provided hours of conflict and drama not possible with music videos alone, as evidenced by MTV’s regular *Real World* “marathons,” which often show 8 hours or more of episodes in a row.

The fact that MTV’s newest reality show, *The Osbournes*, gave the network a 25% ratings boost (Romano, 2002) suggests that the reality format continues to serve MTV well. Likewise, the fact that *The Osbournes* was scheduled in a competitive prime-time slot, as was TNT’s *Witchblade*, works as further evidence of MTV’s otherwise chaotic scheduling practice and its sense of itself as a second-choice network. Like TNT, MTV relies on programming practices that generally work against any sense of regimented viewing, as illustrated previously. When the network finds a program that can compete head to head with the other networks, however, it employs a more traditional, regimented schedule. Indeed, new episodes of *Real World* are generally unveiled during a prime-time slot before being released into MTV’s chaotic, repetitious larger schedule. The fact that MTV seldom programs regular prime-time pieces underscores their identity as a second-choice network.

Like TNT, MTV thus demonstrates strategies of repeatability, uncertainty, and familiarity. Like TNT, MTV repeats shows throughout the day and throughout the schedule. Here, viewers can construct the show through various drive-bys,
being thus encouraged to stop each time they stumble back on something they have seen before. Likewise, MTV's chaotic schedule ensures that its viewers never know quite what they will get. As with TNT, MTV encourages a kind of accidental relationship between viewers and the network, never allowing them to fully ritualize their relationship with the network's programs. Whereas the sense of familiarity developed by TNT works through the repetition of well-known movies and made-for-TV accounts of well-known events, MTV's version of familiarity comes from a repetition of stereotypical ethnic, sexual, gender, and political types. Programs such as Real World and Road Rules create a version of multicultural America and then stand by as its various members do battle, ensuring the drama that MTV requires to draw in viewers who might otherwise zap past the network. The network also, of course, cannibalizes multicultural issues, offering a parody that ultimately reproduces the stereotypes multicultural values might otherwise be presumed to critique.

In this way, MTV's version of drive-by programming demonstrates much of the same ideas at work with TNT. As a second-choice network, MTV has opted against the seriality that is standard on much network programming. Instead, MTV targets the moving viewer, offering an uncertain schedule of familiar programs, stereotypes, and ideologies that seeks to draw viewers into a conflicted drama of multicultural mayhem.

“ROLLING WITH THE PUNCHES”:
CNN, FEAR, AND THE REPEATABILITY OF NEWS

On the morning of October 22, 2002, after the Washington DC sniper had claimed his latest victim, Paula Zahn admitted to the drive-by programming practices that, as with TNT and MTV, are part of CNN’s strategy of storytelling. “We’re just rolling with the punches here, too,” she told CNN’s audience members. Indeed, as a 24-hour news network CNN must always present itself in the midst of making news. CNN’s stories must always be in progress, suggesting that viewers should continue watching or tune back in. As a result, CNN’s coverage works much like that of TNT and MTV. The network must find ways to tell stories that both keep current viewers interested and draw in passers-by.

Like MTV and TNT, CNN can be considered a second-choice network. Like them, CNN does not compete with the bigger networks in prime-time programming. Unlike MTV and TNT, however, CNN seems a first choice network during moments of crisis. For instance, one of CNN’s early ratings spikes came in 1985 when the network’s coverage of the TWA hostage crisis tripled the network’s ratings average from the previous month (“Hostage Crisis Triples CNN Ratings,” 1985). CNN really established itself, however, during the Gulf War, when the network’s ratings ranged from 4.7 to 10.9 million homes (up from 930,000 during the time prior to the war; Rosen, 1991). In addition to earning CNN high ratings, the Gulf War also caused particular kinds of problems for the other networks. As Jay Rosen (1991) explains:
The networks also saw their ratings jump during the war, but not their revenues. For them, war coverage cut into prime-time hours normally reserved for entertainment shows; the advertisers didn’t like it and refused to buy ads. War news, they said, was not the right “environment.” (p. 622)

Advertisers ran from the major broadcast networks and towards CNN. During its Gulf coverage, CNN was able to raise its advertising rates from $3,500 to $20,000 (Rosen, 1991). While other networks were losing money, CNN was raking it in.

CNN clearly learned an important lesson from its Gulf War coverage. Viewers and advertisers flock to CNN during moments of crisis. As a result, national crises are good for CNN in a way that they aren’t for the other networks. Without a crisis to cover, CNN’s ratings tend to dwindle. September 11, for instance, sent the network to the top of the Nielsen’s ratings in September and October (Romano & Higgins, 2002), but the network’s ratings leveled off as the war on terror became less of a front-page story. For CNN, such things seem to have suggested that the network must ensure that national crises last as long as possible. The longer a particular crisis stays within the public imagination, the more likely viewers are to flip to CNN to find out the latest news. This idea plays a central role within CNN’s own particular vision of drive-by programming. CNN’s strategy for attracting viewers who might otherwise pass the network by has become a matter of holding on to a big story and making it go as long as possible. Whether telling stories of presidential indiscretions, shark attacks, kidnappings, or snipers, CNN seeks out national crises and then carries them on as long as possible.

CNN’s strategy of constructing a feeling that the national public is falling apart reiterates a long line of crisis reportage. As a 24-hour news network, however, CNN inflects this practice in different ways. Because CNN sustains particular crisis stories as long as it can, it must constantly maintain a sense of uncertainty, like TNT and MTV, even while repeating a familiar story. In the coverage of the Washington/Virginia sniper shootings of 2002, for instance, one anchor specializing in medical news filled space by dramatizing the precise trauma that a shooting victim might experience. Discussing the ways in which the doctors would assess the victim, the anchor explained the “ABC’s” of trauma (assessing the Airway, checking the patient’s Breathing, checking the patient’s Circulation), dramatizing the story akin to an episode of ER. Likewise, the anchor took time to explain the kinds of damage that a .223 caliber bullet could do to someone’s internal organs. Posing in front of a cut-away model torso complete with removable lungs, heart, kidneys, spleen, and liver, this anchor led the viewer along the path of the bullet, showing how it might pass through these various organs, doing nearly irreparable damage. Such details capitalize on a sense of fear and uncertainty, reiterating the feeling of crisis that CNN’s other footage continually attempts to sustain.

Throughout this sniper coverage, these same newscasters regularly emphasized the fact that they did not know the precise details of the stories they were telling. The newsmen taking us along the path of the bullet, for instance, reiterated the fact that we did not yet know where the most recent sniper victim was struck by the bullet, emphasizing that his model discussion was purely speculative. Indeed, both he and Paula Zahn repeated that they did not know much information about the
shooting they were discussing. “Paula, you mentioned not knowing the information, not knowing the details,” the anchorman stressed after showing us the inner organs of the human body. Still, he reassured us, “You can tell just how complicated something like that might be.” Although such an admission, as well as Zahn’s earlier concession that she and her fellow anchors were only “rolling with the punches,” might seem to undercut these anchors’ authority, their remarks fit well within CNN’s programming strategies. In the land of drive-by news programming, not knowing the news is no reason not to provide it. Constantly rolling with the punches, the anchors themselves seem off guard, enacting the very uncertainty they hope to evoke within their viewers.

Even as CNN’s coverage evokes a sense of uncertainty and crisis, CNN creates a particular sense of familiarity as well. In maintaining a set of well-established American journalistic rituals, CNN regularly frames its stories through a familiar sense of ethnocentrism and middle-American values (Campbell, 1991; Gans, 1979). In a correspondence with Mediaweek magazine, Walter Isaacson, former chairman of CNN news group, illustrates the network’s desire to produce international news with a familiar, middle-American perspective, giving one example of CNN’s ethnocentrism:

I think we’ve got to find a way to deliver foreign news with an emphasis on why it’s relevant to America [and] make it palatable. News is a public service, a public interest, and we’ve got to deliver, but we also have to get the audience to want to watch what we give them. (“Has Everything Changed?” 2001, p. 37)

In seeking to make its news both “relevant” and “palatable” to the American audience, CNN reiterates a sense of middle-American values that permeates the stories the network tells. Demonstrating this idea, in CNN’s coverage of war atrocities in Kosovo, Anelia Dimitrova (2001) finds a series of ideological assumptions at work within the narrative devices through which the war is framed. For instance, “rather than quoting refugee voices in their stories,” Dimitrova asserts, CNN’s field journalists “presented the information they had gathered earlier and off camera, as a summary.” As a result, “the journalists in the field became omniscient narrators who spoke twice—once for themselves, and a second time for the speechless refugees.” Likewise, CNN’s tales of kidnapping—another of its repeated crisis stories that pervaded its 2002 coverage—were framed as all the more tragic because they took place in good, middle-American neighborhoods. Such reporting practices illustrate CNN’s tendency to frame stories through the familiar frame of the middle-American reporter.

Hence, like TNT and MTV, CNN manages seemingly competing notions of familiarity and uncertainty as the network narrates its repetitive stories. Although neither crisis reportage nor a focus on middle-American values is unique to CNN, the iterations of these practices are particularly interesting in the context of the network’s 24-hour news coverage. As a 24-hour news network, CNN has the capacity to give its viewers a much greater variety of news than is available from other television news sources. Instead, CNN chooses to focus on big stories of crisis and carry them throughout the day. By doing so, CNN creates a feeling of uncertainty and fear. The repetitious images and stories of September 11 are a
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poignant example of this strategy. In showing particular images again and again CNN demonstrates one component of the drive-by programming scheme that dominates their network, maintaining a sense of anxiety and uncertainty about the American public. Even as the network performs national crisis after crisis, however, it also celebrates and reproduces a stereotypical middle-American way of seeing. Whether telling stories of international atrocity or local catastrophe CNN frames stories via a middle-American lens. Taking these strategies together, the network simultaneously and repetitively suggests the demise of the American public even as it enacts the public’s health through a consistent repetition of mainstream public values.

CNN’s narrative focus on national crises thus suggests both the fragility and tenacity of the American public. Helping to clarify these ideas, Thomas Dunn (1993) emphasizes the role of television news in the construction of fear and the relationship between this fear and the public sphere:

Fear is the political aesthetic of the medium of television because, from the roving position of fear, one is able to move past the most obvious (and pointless) claims regarding the capacities of television to present the “truth” of the world. . . . From the liminal point of fear, one can gain the perspective that allows one to tune into, without being subject to, the recreated representation that television enables. (p. 313)

Television, in Dunn’s view, both creates fear within the viewing subject and distances the subject from that fear, creating a liminal space in which viewers can experience a sense of national bodily crisis. Making a similar point, Michael Warner (1994) argues that “mass injury can always command a headline; it gets classed as immediate-reward news. But whatever kind of reward makes disaster rewarding, it evidently has to do with injury to a mass body—an already abstracted body assembled by the simultaneity of disaster somewhere other than here” (p. 392). CNN’s crisis coverage contributes to this, using disaster as a way to draw in and unite a viewing audience.

In this manner, CNN employs repeatability, uncertainty, and familiarity in its own version of drive-by programming. At the least, CNN’s crisis coverage produces ambivalent messages about the American public sphere and within the narratives the network chooses to present. Simultaneously capitalizing on potential threats to the American public and celebrating American mainstream ideologies, CNN performs both the health and instability of the American public sphere. More seriously, such hyper-emotional stories, Stjepan Mestrovic (1997) argues, create “an artificially contrived hothouse of luxurious and exotic emotions that do not necessarily translate into action” (pp. 32-33). Thus, CNN’s ongoing narrative may “[lead] to compassion fatigue, anomie as the malady of infinite desires that can never be satisfied, and a diffuse anxiety that colors almost every waking hour, among other pathologies” (p. 33). Caught in the sort of liminal space that both Dunn and Warner note above—a space between the horror of a potential threat, and the thrill of seeing a public united before their eyes—CNN’s viewers are presented with a thoroughly ambivalent viewing position.

CNN’s drive-by programming practices thus employ a perverse aesthetic of fear and fascination. By repetitiously covering stories of national crisis, filling in
space with fearful details of particular stories (e.g., the path of a bullet through the organs of the body), and performing an uncertainty that keeps the viewer (presumably along with the anchor people) off guard, CNN relies on uncertainty and familiarity to sustain the stories it must tell for 24 hours a day. In the process, the network constantly threatens and rebuilds the public sphere, creating a sense of horrific danger that seeks to bind people to the drama of the national body.

CONCLUSION

The combination of repeatability, uncertainty, and familiarity in what I have here termed drive-by programming seeks to target and draw in the otherwise roving viewer. Whereas the seriality of the more conventional networks seeks to regiment time and offer people a ritualized viewing schedule, drive-by programming seeks to keep viewers off guard. Rather than asking audience members to tune into a particular, ritualized time slot, drive-by programming encourages viewers to stumble across their network. Once they do, familiar programs, movies, stereotypes, and ideologies work to draw people into a particular story arc, delivering them from one commercial to the next with relative ease. In the process, drive-by programming also shapes viewers' experiences of programs, giving them dramatic fragments to consume each time they pass by a particular network.

The consequences of these drive-by programming practices run from the fairly mundane to the highly disturbing. The constant repetition of movies, programs, and images and the fragmented ways in which viewers experience them may contribute to particular postmodern sensibilities that some scholars, such as Mestrovic, have criticized. Still more seriously, MTV's use of cultural stereotypes and CNN's constant crisis coverage have disturbing implications for the public sphere, distorting the importance of multicultural values and manifesting a sense of fear as central to public participation. CNN's use of drive-by programming proves particularly problematic in that it imposes a variety of limitations on the kinds of stories that the network chooses to tell and thus the news that viewers receive. Because CNN's drive-by news programming thrives on crisis, stories that cannot be framed as somehow detrimental to the public sphere are less likely to make it on screen. Likewise, the constant repetition of crisis stories may cultivate in viewers a distorted sense of fear and danger regarding the world around them (Gerbner, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994; Signorielli & Morgan, 1990). In these ways, drive-by programming strategies direct, manipulate, and distort various cultural anxieties and ideological values for the benefits of the network and its advertisers.

Drive-by programming practices also highlight the dynamic relationship between media technologies, cultural practices, and programming strategies, all of which continuously change and transform one another. Seriality made sense in the broadcast era and continues to work for the major networks just as conventional narrowcasting continues to work for a number of cable networks. Likewise, both seriality and narrowcasting have their own cultural implications and effects, some of which no doubt overlap with those of drive-by programming. Drive-by programming itself illustrates one way in which second-choice networks have responded to and exploited the channel surfing encouraged by a multichanneled,
remote-controlled media environment. As television technologies change, other cultural practices and programming strategies are likely to develop as well. For instance, the widespread diffusion of digital cable systems, many of which provide a menu option that allows viewers to survey various networks’ offerings without actually flipping through channels, may soon suggest additional alternatives to channel surfing via the remote control. We should expect new programming strategies in response to these and other developments in technology and viewing habits—all of which will have their own implications for the kinds of stories networks choose to tell and the ways in which they choose to tell them.

In the meantime, the repeatability, uncertainty, and familiarity of drive-by programming will likely continue, as will the ideological and cultural narratives that accompany it. Indeed, the usage and consequences of these programming practices are likely to become all the more pronounced as other second-choice networks—other rerun movie channels similar to TNT, other “music channels” similar to MTV, and other 24-hour news networks—continue to adopt similar drive-by practices.

NOTES

1. By today’s major networks, I mean primarily the big three, NBC, ABC, and CBS, plus Fox, which regularly challenge each other for prime-time ratings.
2. Although outside the scope of this article, the concept of uncertainty has an important cache within the study of communication and information technology. For work on uncertainty within information theory, see Shannon and Weaver (1963). Likewise, see Berger and Bradac’s (1982) work on uncertainty reduction theory for a treatment of uncertainty within interpersonal communication scholarship.
3. For a discussion of television fan’s dedication to a particular, ritualized time slot, see, for instance, McKinley (1997).
5. For a discussion of the cultural and ideological effects of cable narrowcasting see, for instance, Byars and Meehan (1994-1995).

REFERENCES


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