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Riffing on the News

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jul. 20, 2009 NCR Today

When Walter Cronkite, former long-time anchor for CBS evening news died on July 17, I took a trip down memory lane.

It was on New Year?s Day 1960 that I first remember ?the news.? I was eight years old and Chet Huntley turned to David Brinkley and said ?good night? noting that it was now 1960; a new decade had begun.

I was ten when I sent in a post card from the laundry mat and subscribed my family to *Time* magazine. My dad never knew where it came from, but when the bill came he said, ?OK?, and paid it. For years, I used to like reading ?Milestones.?

My grandparents who lived next door got the *San Diego Union* in the morning and we got the *San Diego Tribune* in the evening. The Union had a whole page of news photos every day. The Tribune always had news that seemed more up-to-the-moment.

Then came November 22, 1963. I was in seventh grade. It was a Friday. We heard the news about President Kennedy?s death from a boy at about 11:30am who had a contraband transistor radio. We chided him for saying something like that; the unthinkable. A while later the principal confirmed the news and said we would stay in school until the end of the day because President Kennedy would want us to.

So I missed Walter Cronkite?s now famous announcement but have seen it numerous times since then. My family was glued to the news all weekend. My dad, who had lived through World War II and the Korean War, was stunned speechless when he witnessed Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald.
Despite beginning the decade with Huntley and Brinkley, Walter Cronkite was the sound track of the news for me during the 60?s: Vietnam, Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King?s assassinations, men on the moon. Cronkite loved the space program.

Watergate. By now I was in the convent and radio was the preferred news medium except when something big went down. The end of the Vietnam War, the boat people, the famine in Biafra, Idi Amin the killer dictator.
A news outlet asked me a few weeks ago, preparing for the eventuality of Walter Cronkite?s death, what I remembered about him and Catholic issues like abortion. I don?t recall what he might have said during the Roe v. Wade era, what commentary he may have added. I suggested that the reporter visit the Museum of Radio and Television in Manhattan and check out some archival footage. I caught a scene of Cronkite announcing the Supreme Court decision, but no commentary.

In fact, I am not sure what Walter Cronkite thought about a lot of things except when he said we needed to leave Vietnam and his enthusiasm for the space program.

Here?s what I do remember about Walter Cronkite: that voice. Marshall McLuhan, the great communication theorist of the 20th century, famously said, ?The medium is the message.? Then he wrote a book with Quentin Fiore (1967) entitled ?The Medium is the Massage.? Media, especially sound, have immediate sensory effects

on people. Media massage our emotions. Thinking and analysis, should we choose to do so, come after. Walter Cronkite?s voice not only massaged our unsettled emotions when national and world events seemed out of control, but it comforted us. His gentle visage reassured us.

He was more than a voice, however. Cronkite was first and foremost a print, radio and then television journalist; he gathered and analyzed news and then presented it. He wasn?t a news ?reader,? but an actual reporter who sought to understand the events he presented to the audience. Then when he reported the news it was with the assurance and authority of experience. We believed him; I for one, never questioned him. You can always tell when a news reader doesn?t understand the story they are reporting.

I have a theory: Cronkite unwittingly ushered in the age of infotainment because of the emotional connection he created with the audience through sight and sound. Market values called ratings came to play and all of a sudden the competition meant newer and supposedly more engaging elements were ?needed.?

One evening, not long ago, a young, beautiful, chic CNN news reader came on at the top of the hour. She pointed out the top five or six news stories on the screen that ?we have selected? to break down for us that evening. She and her anonymous team chose the news they wanted me to hear then ?broke it down? for me. I know I sound like a cynic, but it was a joke to me. I wonder what news ?they? left out and what Walter Cronkite might have said when he witnessed the change in news reporting. A beautiful young lady was going to massage the news she chose for me to consume. Infotainment.

A couple of years ago I filled out a form on the website of a local TV network affiliate that had recently replaced one morning news anchor with a new one. I complained that I disliked the way she read news about tragedies as if she was going to a birthday party. She is still happily anchoring the news despite my observation, but sometimes she is able to match her tone appropriately with events. She jauntily reads the news about murders and mayhem; she doesn?t seem to understand the issues or events she reads off to us. She is theater. Infotainment.

What a disservice CBS did to Katie Couric, Walter Cronkite?s current successor. I admit it. I was and am a fan of Couric. I watched her first week of anchoring CBS Evening News. I felt so badly for this woman who is so educated, experienced and understands the issues. Her handlers had trivialized the news into saccharine puff pieces seeking a new audience perhaps. Infotainment for me? No thank you. I have lost my allegiance to NBC evening news as well. I watch ABC?s Charles Gibson, or rather my community does, because he?s is on the same channel as Jeopardy that follows immediately. It?s convenience.

In one way, maybe it is a good thing the way news is delivered on television has changed. Now I question the dickens out of it. With the Internet I can check other sources. With the BBCReader App on my iPhone I can get World News any time, news I might not hear from U.S. national and local outlets that ?select? certain news stories for me. The BBC selects its own, but at least I can get more than 100 news stories at the touch of a finger and see what else is going on in the world.

I live with a sister from the Philippines. Not long ago a ferry capsized there and it didn?t make the U.S. news for several days. We knew about it immediately because of the information network among the expat Filipino community. There have been two major bombings in Pakistan near the Catholic cathedral in Karachi. Our sisters run a bookstore nearby. We didn?t see it or hear about this in the news, but we heard about it through our congregation?s network telling us our convent has sustained damage but the people and sisters were okay. The same with recent political unrest in Madagascar.

When I lived in the UK in the mid-90?s I bought the London Times every day. The sisters in my community told me that was the worst paper of them all because it was so slanted to the right. I read other papers, too. But in the whole two years the only articles I noticed on Latin America that even came close to acknowledging Latin

America were articles on the Falkland Islands ? a contested British territory off the coast of Argentina. Every news outlet has a point of view. These POV?s have become narrower in an age of niche marketing, too. They select the news they think we want to hear or see.
Walter Cronkite was a national icon and an institution who?s slightly gravely tone and gravitas grounded us through uncertain times.

I do not think we will ever have great broadcast journalists like Walter Cronkite again but I hope we have broadcast journalists who will be great in whatever aspect of the process they have a role. The media as delivery systems are constantly morphing and everyone, literally everyone who has access to the technology, can be a content provider, too. The way news is both gathered and generated has changed, though in field and on-site reporters remain our eyes and ears on the ground.

What do I want in news reporting? I want hard news from around the world, not just the stories that touch American interests. If it were not for celebrities drawing our attention to Darfur, famine, and poverty, would the news even cover these situations and human realities?

I appreciate the journalists on the ground; so many have lost their lives trying to find the truth and relay what is going on. So, not all aspects of news reporting are disappointing. Some reporters are outright heroes. I am thinking of Kathryn Bigelow?s current film ?The Hurt Locker? based on a story written by a reporter imbedded with an Army bomb squad unit in Iraq, Mark Boal. The film details how war becomes a drug to soldiers and the terrible psychological and physical effects of this task on them. The film won the Catholic SIGNIS (www.signis.net) jury grand prize at the Venice Film Festival in 2008. Paul Haggis? gripping tale of the consequences of the Iraq war on young soldiers,? In the Valley of Elah?, 2007, also won the Catholic jury award at Venice the year before as well as the Catholics in Media Award (www.CatholicsInMedia.org). It was based on a magazine article written by the embedded journalist Mark Boal.

Recently my sister found her seven year-old son standing in front of the television where people on one of the news commentary shows were shouting each other down about the war in Iraq. Theater. Infotainment. She found him with tears running down his face. ?What?s wrong, Max??she asked. ?This is scary, Mommy.? She tried to assuage his fears by telling him that the fact that these people were talking about this on television meant someone would do something to keep him safe. ?Do you feel better now, Max?? ?No,? he said. ?Well, Mommy and Daddy would never let anything happen to you.? Pause. ?Do you feel better now?? ?No.? They finally agreed that if Max?s older brother said things would be ok, Max would feel a little better. Then my sister changed the channel.

The way news is reported, especially local news, is scary. ?Stay tuned to find out if you have seen this gunman?? or something similar. I bet Walter Cronkite did not approve of how tabloid the local news has become, how homogenous. How template of them.

What is the point of news the way it is provided for us now? What is our responsibility? To ask questions. Not to become cynics, but to be skeptical. The Church?s best document on the theology of communication is **Communio et Progressio[1]** issued in 1971, a document called for by the 1963 document of Vatican II, **Inter Mirifica[2]**. In Chapter 2 of Communio et Progressio, it says that all people have a right to be informed, to have access to the news so that authentic public opinion can be formed; that the community requires well-informed citizens. Infotainment doesn?t quite reach this standard.

I am watching these very young news celebrities talk about Walter Cronkite as if they knew him, knowing that researchers, perhaps even younger than they, assembled the facts and pictures to construct the story. Though they are earnest, they sound unsure, tentative. They don?t know who Walter Cronkite was because they don?t know the context of the times in which he anchored us. But I am glad they are showing this great man the respect that is due him. For those of us of a certain age, Walter Cronkite is forever a part of our lives.

?And that?s the way it is.?

Rest in peace, Mr. Cronkite.

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