

Disguised as News

The growing use of video news releases — including those promoting the Federal Government’s agenda — in real TV news. | **By John V. Pavlik**

Fake news has a long and inglorious history in the U.S. and around the world. Since at least the mid-1800s, showmen such as P.T. Barnum have staged for publicity purposes what historian Daniel Boorstin a century later dubbed “pseudo-events.” Perhaps the most potentially deceptive form of fake news, the video news release (VNRs), emerged in the 1980s as a video version of the traditional news or press release. Having started as oftentimes amateurish promotional video on three-quarter-inch tape, mailed or sent by overnight delivery to selected television stations for possible inclusion in the evening newscast, the VNR has since evolved into a slick public-relations tool and a somewhat disturbing mainstay of much television news, particularly at the local level.

Largely because of their limited production quality, early VNRs were infrequently used in television newscasts. But over the next two decades, VNRs grew in sophistication with producers often linking their VNRs to topical events and formatting them to the needs of local newsrooms. They made the sponsor logos less visible and obtrusive. They utilized the latest in digital technologies to produce high-quality video content.

Consequently, VNRs have become a major tool for profit and not-for-profit organizations alike to get their messages on television news. A 1990 study by Dan Berkowitz and Douglas B. Adams found that 22 percent of VNRs sent to local television stations were used, at least in part. This usage rate is comparable to the use of traditional news or press releases by local newspapers. A 1994 study by J. H. Minnis and Cornelius B. Pratt found that 34 percent of print news releases were used at least in part by a weekly newspaper.

Under the Bush Administration VNRs have been taken to entirely new heights. The Bush Administration has promoted its agenda via VNRs on everything from the Defense Department and the war in Iraq to policies at the Census Bureau and the Department of Health and Human Services. In March of 2005 David Barstow and Robin Stein reported in *The New York Times* that 20 federal agencies have made and distributed hundreds of television news segments since 2002, adding that this barrage of fake news has resulted in the kind of publicity any president would covet.

As illustration, consider the script of one Bush Administration VNR segment that aired during this period: “Thank you, Bush. Thank you, U.S.A.,” a joyous

Iraqi-American said to a reporter in Kansas City for a piece about the fall of Baghdad. Another report spoke of a “successful” Bush administration “drive to strengthen aviation security”; the “journalist” called it “one of the most remarkable campaigns in aviation history.”

To viewers, these segments looked no different than any other 90-second reports on the local news. In truth, the federal government produced and distributed them both (and many others). The State Department produced the fall of Baghdad report. The Agriculture Department’s office of communications made the farm report.

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VNRs are an especially appealing tool for public-relations or governmental uses because, unlike paid sponsorship or advertising, the VNR exploits the heightened credibility of news. Research by Owen and Karrh in 1996 demonstrated that viewers see VNRs within newscasts as more credible, or believable, than commercials for the same firms within the same newscast.

The heightened credibility of VNRs in newscasts is coupled with the popularity of television news for greater impact. More Americans get their news from TV than from any other medium. In fall 2006, already high TV viewership further increased an average of four minutes a day from four hours 35 minutes to four hours 39 minutes driven by the appetite for

news among 35-year-olds and older Americans, who were tuning in to coverage of major news stories such as the effects of Hurricane Katrina. VNRs selected for use by the roughly 850 TV newsrooms in the U.S. (630 ABC, CBS and NBC affiliates; 220 Fox and independent stations, according to Vernon Stone 2001 update, <http://web.missouri.edu/~jourvs/gtvops.html>) can easily reach many millions of viewers. One study by Mark D. Harmon and Candace White published in 2001 examined 14 VNRs distributed in 1998 and 1999 and found portions of those VNRs were aired 4,245 times by stations across the U.S. Further, new technologies have made it increasingly

effective to distribute VNRs in digital format via satellite or other broadband technologies. Typically, journalists can view or download VNRs online before deciding whether to use them.

Together, this confluence of factors has helped the VNR to emerge as a major part of the television news landscape.

Just why do stations air VNRs? There are a number of reasons. Sometimes VNRs are timely and provide rare or unusual video that might otherwise be hard to get, especially for a local television station on a limited budget. Sometimes VNRs help fill in gaps in stories otherwise lacking good visual material, or they might provide interesting video on a slow news day. And VNRs are attractive to TV newscasts because they’re cheap or free or even can make a station some money (some VNR providers will pay a station to air a VNR) and—this is where things get especially sticky—they’re safe. VNRs typically provide non-controversial

video that feels good to viewers and sponsors. There is usually no risk of criticism from the subject of the story. This is in contrast to investigative journalism, which is expensive, risky and often controversial and can cost the station advertisers.

Measuring VNR Usage

Exactly how widely VNRs are used is somewhat hard to determine. VNR production and distribution firms contend fairly extensive use. In contrast, surveys of news directors generally suggest VNRs are only occasionally or even rarely used, even on local television newscasts. Scott Atkinson, News Director at WWNY-TV, the Fox affiliate in Watertown, NY, told me that “we never ever use them, except our weekly farm report, which gets them regularly from the U.S. Department Agriculture. But, I’m an absolutist about not using VNRs and even this use is going away.”

At the network news level, surveys indicate VNR use is even more sparse or non-existent. One situation when a network news division might use a VNR in whole or part would be when the VNR itself becomes the subject of a developing news story, and a clip might be incorporated as an illustration (e.g., if a group such as Swift Boat Veterans and POWs for Truth had issued a VNR as part of its communications efforts against the presidential campaign of Sen. John Kerry, a network news story might have featured a segment to illustrate the group’s tactics).

Jeff Wurtz, Senior Vice President of sales and marketing at VNR producer, News Broadcast Network (NBN), told me recently that “NBC, especially the

Nightly News, does not use VNRs. Instead they do use third-party material such as logos and footage they don’t have access to getting. They would never use a third-party VNR with voice over but may use footage that is unique or exclusive to the vendor for a good story. Every video package we send has the supplier of the video clearly identified with contact information for the station/network to call on if they have questions.”

The Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) in 2005 conducted a survey of 100 members on their use of VNRs. Based on this survey, the RTNDA issued a statement indicating few TV stations air VNRs, and those that do usually identify the source. But as RTNDA President Barbara Cochran acknowledges, getting good data on VNR use is a challenge. “It’s kind of like the Loch Ness Monster. Everyone talks about it, but not many people have actually seen it.”

The Project for Excellence in Journalism, a nonpartisan media-research group, surveyed 103 TV news directors about VNRs use. Sixty-six percent reported never using them. Of the 34 percent who admitted using them, 10 percent said they always label VNRs. Yet the remaining 24 percent said they labeled only “occasionally,” “rarely” or “never.”

On CBS Newspath, VNRs are transmitted in a separate segregated area and are clearly identified as a VNR feed, John Frazee, senior vice president, CBS News Services, told me recently. Moreover, CBS will not accept a VNR unless the company providing the VNR discloses who paid for it. On occasion, CBS will not accept a VNR even when the source is known. Frazee explained

that this is done on a case-by-case basis, and typically occurs when the VNR is actually issue advocacy in the guise of news story. Typical of the VNRs was one that was transmitted last January with the story slug, VNR. The title: Wrinkle

Reducing Breakthrough.

The length: 4:04. The source: VIDICOM. And the "reporter": Christy Ferrer. CBS has clearly labeled the VNR as such, using these terms: "This

is a Video News Release. This VNR is not produced by CBS News. The facts and/or claims made in this VNR have not been verified by CBS News. The producers of this VNR have paid CBS Newspath a fee to transmit this VNR and accompanying information to stations, affiliates and clients." Frazee indicates the fee is in the amount of hundreds of dollars per VNR. As part of the research for this article, a search of the CBS Newspath archive <http://www.newspath.cbs.com/> produced a list of more than 100 VNRs that had been distributed via the newswire for possible use by network affiliates.

CNN Newsource has a similar process of formally vetting VNRs before they are accepted for transmission. VNRs must adhere to a variety of formatting requirements including ensuring the script approved corresponds with the video. The fee structure for carrying a VNR on CNN Newsource is \$2,500 if the VNR is less than five minutes; \$5,000 for five to ten minutes, and \$7,500 if ten minutes or greater (not to exceed 20 minutes).

Though not the news division, CBS also operates a unit that produces and distributes VNRs for hire. A CBS Media Group advertisement in a 2002 issue of

PR Week encouraged potential clients to hire CBS and "put one of the world's leading media companies to work for you producing video news releases." CBS even guarantees placement on the CBS Newspath VNR feed.

Using VNRs is generally frowned upon by journalists and educators and seen as at best lazy reporting and at worst unethical.

Why news directors tend to deny using VNRs may be the result of several factors. One may be that news directors are not necessarily making the choice as to whether to use a VNR. A producer, assignment editor, or a specialized reporter may make the actual decision. Another reason may be professional embarrassment, as using VNRs is generally frowned upon by journalists and educators and seen as at best lazy reporting and at worst unethical. In addition, just what constitutes a VNR is not universally agreed upon. Some may define a VNR exclusively as that which arrives in a package from a PR or VNR production/distribution firm or labeled as such on a network video feed. A satellite or Internet feed from NASA with footage from the Mars Rover may not be considered a VNR. Local TV news editors may receive VNR material redistributed from a regional or network/national satellite feed or an international video feed from the AP or Reuters, not realizing the source for a particular clip may be a VNR. What constitutes using a VNR is another possible point of confusion. Some in the newsroom may not consider incorporating a five second clip from a VNR as "using" the VNR. Research

shows that the use of short segments of VNRs is not uncommon.

Few VNRs are used in their entirety. Research shows that just four percent of uses are greater than 60 seconds, the likely length of an entire VNR. Instead, reporters or producers tend to select segments to incorporate into a story, with original video shot by a local news crew. A 1996 study by Glen Cameron and D. Blount examined how newscasts used the VNR "America Responds to AIDS" created on behalf of the Centers for Disease Control. They found that this packaged VNR was heavily edited with most newscasts using B-roll footage. Most stations did not use the complete VNR. Rather, they incorporated video segments from the VNR into stories featuring video they produced originally about the AIDS issue. In fact, many VNR providers are actually producing and distributing far more b-roll footage than VNRs. Ed Lamoureaux, senior vice president of WestGlen Communications, a leading producer of VNRs, said his firm actually produces and distributes b-roll packages at a rate of 5:1 over VNRs. "Stations have indicated they don't air VNRs in full, so distributing a b-roll package is cheaper and more useful to stations."

VNRs are typically about 90 seconds long, but may be accompanied by additional video, sound bits and even a proposed script. VNR researchers Harmon and White explain how VNRs are typically used. "A reporter can create a voice-over story in which the video and natural sound are played," Harmon and White note, "while the television audience hears the anchor reading copy, or sound bites and/or visuals from the VNR can be included

in a story written by the reporter." A common method of using VNRs is the "voice-over" story, where video is shown as an anchor reads copy on-air.

The Harmon and White findings show that stations in any markets use VNRs, but stations in smaller markets are apt to use longer video segments. Stations in smaller markets also tend to air VNR segments later in the day or days subsequent to the initial satellite feed. VNRs dealing with the topics of health, safety and children were the most likely to be used. Thinly veiled promotional VNRs received only infrequent usage, although they still sometimes found a home on local newscasts. The Harmon and White study showed that a Priceline.com VNR about "Y2K" travel was used 30 times, for instance. The source of a VNR may influence a local journalist's decision to use a VNR, as well. In the Harmon and White study, VNRs from the nonprofit American Academy of Pediatrics had 499 station uses, and eight VNRs from the federal government VNRs, eight from the Consumer Product Safety Commission, and a Census Department piece on census techniques, were used 3,585 times. In contrast, three VNRs from private companies (one from priceline.com and two from a light manufacturing company) were used only 107 times.

The Harmon and White study also showed that about two-thirds of the time a VNR is used on the same day it is received by the station. About one in five VNRs were used the next day after the initial feed. One in ten of the airings occurred within about two weeks, with VNRs rarely used beyond that period. The most common time slot for VNR use is the 5-6 p.m. hour,

with more than a quarter of the airings occurring then. About one in five airings occurred during early morning newscasts between five and nine am. Slightly fewer uses occurred during the ten pm to midnight late newscast. The remainder were distributed throughout the day.

The advent of electronic tracking of VNRs has greatly improved the accuracy of determining how widespread the use of VNRs has become. One leading electronic system is SIGMA by Nielsen Media Research. It covers VNR use in all 210 U.S. television markets. "Because SIGMA places an active code in the Vertical Blanking Interval (VBI)," Nielsen Media Research reports the "technology electronically recognizes and records each airing throughout the entire U.S. with over 95% accuracy."

Another system is a subsidiary of MediaLink and is called TeleTrax. It utilizes an electronically embedded "watermark" securely measuring VNR use even when digitally altered. The watermark is almost impossible to strip off in editing, so monitoring is highly reliable.

A third VNR monitoring option is provided by VMS (www.vmsinfo.com). VMS uses human monitoring in the top 50 designated marketing areas (DMAs). This is an important supplement to automated monitoring because of the slight possibility that even a watermark or VBI code might get stripped away in editing. VMS in 2005 introduced its own automated VNR monitoring system as well.

A March 2004 press release from MediaLink provided insight into the use and monitoring of its most-widely used VNRs. "The European Mars Express space mission and vehicle crash testing

of automobiles reached the greatest audiences in the Top 10 VNR List of 2003 issued by Medialink Worldwide Incorporated, a global leader in providing news and media services for professional communicators. This year's list, the latest in a 15-year annual tradition, also included news about ancient history, popular culture, sports and health.

Topping the list at more than one billion viewers worldwide is the European Space Agency's (ESA) mission to Mars. Shown on newscasts in more than 30 countries including China, France, Russia and Brazil, Medialink's United Kingdom-based production team created a television news story on behalf of ESA about the launch and mission. The video was then distributed by Medialink via satellite to more than 500 television station newsrooms worldwide, many of which incorporated all or part of the video into their news broadcasts.

Using its SIGMA electronic tracking system, Nielsen has found VNR use to be ubiquitous. In 1996, a SIGMA showed 100% of newsrooms using at least a portion of a VNR at least on occasion. Another electronic tracking survey showed a similar level of use in 1999, with more than 90% of U. S. television stations reporting to use VNRs.

Obtaining the data on the use of particular VNRs tends to be proprietary so despite the existence of the data, they are hard to obtain for independent analysis.

One study indicates that the average newsroom has ten to 15 VNRs available daily. Making it on air requires high production value and newsworthiness. VNRs typically cost about \$10,000

to \$25,000 to produce, with higher production values generally requiring greater production costs. Moreover, newsroom editors will edit the VNR content to fit their news needs and adapt it to fit their station's unique format or style.

The largest VNR production firm is Medialink. Medialink produces and distributes approximately 1,000 VNRs a year, twice the number of its nearest competitor. Medialink sales in 2005 were more than \$30 million. Companies such as Medialink are hired by client firms who have a particular story or point of view to tell and hope to do so most effectively or persuasively by having their perspective integrated into an independent newscast.

The number of VNRs produced and distributed to TV stations annually in the U.S. is in the thousands. Taken together with other data on the rate of usage of VNRs in the U.S. (22 percent of stations use VNRs), it is likely that viewers are exposed to VNR material on a frequent basis, perhaps even almost daily, and in all media markets, large and small. Consider this observation from a leader in the VNR industry: "One billion viewers for a single news video (i.e., VNR aired on TV newscasts) is an outstanding benchmark, but not surprising as more and more of the world obtains most of their news from television," said Lucy Hadfield, Managing Director, Medialink International. If VNRs were a disease, they would rapidly reach epidemic proportions.

It is also important to recognize that VNRs are rapidly being transformed in the age of digital convergence. Lamoureaux of WestGlen Communications said, "VNRs will

morph into a form of marketing communication that will be available for viewing on portable devices, such as mobile phones, and other technologies." Perhaps more importantly, there will be no need to deliver these videos through news channels. They are already available online and are becoming increasingly so. Viewership is easier to measure online and consumers are able to easily find them through search engines such as Google and Yahoo. The \$64,000 question may be what happens to television news when consumers, or citizens, depending on one's point of view, can get all their "video news" directly from the source via the Internet, rather than from a news media gatekeeper.

Ethics of VNR Usage

The question for television news producers is: what are the ethical implications of using VNRs and is the truth in any way compromised? Scholarly research on VNR use generally concludes that VNRs constitute audience deception. Viewers of VNRs within newscasts tend to believe they are seeing the product of a station's news gathering and independent judgment. They do not generally realize they are actually seeing and hearing the news as told from the perspective of the VNR production company's client.

"FakeNews," a landmark article about VNRs, was published as a cover story in *TV Guide* on Feb. 22, 1992. Author David Lieberman argued that newscasters should not "pretend out of pride that what they broadcast is real news, instead of labeling it for what it is." He added that "There's a good chance that some of the news they [the public]

see will be fake. Not that it's necessarily inaccurate. Just that it was made to plug something else. And it's something the PR community has grown skillful at providing.”

Lieberman recommended that newscasts that air even a portion of a VNR should provide a continuous on-air graphic labeling the VNR. Research to date suggests few stations have implemented this recommendation. With out such labeling, newscasters risked destroying the trust the public has in their broadcasts.

In response, the Public Relations Service Council in June of 1992 formed a committee to create standards governing the level of disclosure in VNR's. Debate over VNR's slowed until 2004 after the Government Accountability Office launched an investigation into the appropriateness of government-funded VNR's.

In June 2005 the U.S. House of Representatives passed an amendment prohibiting for one year the White House and federal agencies from hiring public-relations firms and “journalists” to use fake news to promote government policies. Such legal actions raise serious First Amendment concerns, and may represent unconstitutional barriers to freedom of speech and press. Yet, the movement to take legislative action against broadcasters reflects the growing sentiment against non-disclosed VNR usage. Current FCC regulations require that broadcasters tell viewers the source of a VNR only when the VNR deals with a political

matter or controversial issue, or when the station is paid to air the VNR.

Whether or not the federal government resumes using fake news and VNRs to promote its policies, other groups and organizations will no doubt continue to do so. In this context, are there any appropriate uses of VNRs in the news? Ethicists might contend a VNR should never be used in television news. They would argue that the use of VNRs is an unethical deception of the audience.

In no circumstances should newsrooms compromise their integrity and independence by airing VNR material produced by a government agency promoting its own agenda.

Establishing Guidelines for Using VNRs Appropriately

Realistically, with budget cuts and resource limitations, there is little likelihood that PR firms are going to stop using and distributing VNRs. Under what circumstances or conditions would VNR use be acceptable by a local TV station? Arguably, there are at least five conditions for using or distributing VNRs in an acceptable manner via the news media.

First, journalists should look closely at the content of the VNR and decide whether it might result in the deception of the audience. In no circumstances should newsrooms compromise their integrity and independence by airing VNR material produced by a governmental agency promoting its own agenda. The newsroom staff should trace the motivation of the VNR

provider and examine whether that motivation is acceptable or is designed to manipulate or persuade the news viewing public.

Second, as with traditional press releases, VNRs can contain useful background information. They can suggest a story idea. They can indicate possible sources for a story.

Third, in some rare cases like the NASA Mars video, VNRs may contain footage that might otherwise be extremely difficult if not impossible to obtain independently. If this is the case, then at least portions of the VNR might be appropriately used. Moreover, a government agency such as NASA that might be seen as relatively benign would likely generate more usage. Yet, when the Defense Department is the only source of war-zone video, newsrooms might still use the footage, despite recognizing the biases associated with the source. Lamoureaux of WestGlen Communications provides this perspective. "TV news people know what they're doing, and they view what we provide in VNRs (or b-roll footage) as source material." They still have to vet it.

Fourth, when a network carries a VNR on its video-news feed to affiliates and clients, it should seriously question the appropriateness of accepting payment for carrying that VNR. Accepting payment for transmitting VNRs presents a potential conflict of interest and may erode the credibility

of that news organization.

Finally, when a VNR is used, it should be clearly labeled as such and the source of the video should be indicated. Labeling should not be limited to only those circumstances required by the FCC. Moreover, the station should include on its web site information about the video news release, its provider and how, when and why it was used. Networks that do feed VNR or b-roll material should consider taking things a step further. They should require those who provide a VNR to incorporate a visible watermark on each frame of video that identifies it as a VNR and identifies the source. This would automatically insure that any newscast subsequently airing the video would have no choice but to make clear to the viewer that what is shown is a VNR and not independently produced or obtained by the TV station or network.

By adhering to these VNR usage protocols, news organizations will insure that they keep their audiences informed at the highest levels of journalistic integrity. They will not compromise their commitment to honesty and truth. Ultimately, television news providers will supply the broadest and deepest possible coverage without jeopardizing the public good in which they have been entrusted.

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