

The Life and Death of Live Television

Many “live” programs are delayed or pre-recorded, according to two expert analysts.

By Gary Gumpert and Susan J. Drucker

Live from Lincoln Center!...It's Saturday Night Live!...Live from the Met! Live from Times Square! Live from Iraq! The West Wing debates—Live! There is something compelling and attractive about live broadcasts. There is also something precarious, perhaps something to be feared about radio and television broadcasts that are beyond control once transmitted. We are attracted to the live broadcast because it is magical, unpredictable, once the only possibility. We are concerned about uncertainty and the possibility of something going wrong and have developed insurance options that prevent the transmission of uncertainty.

But let's get to the conclusion first. The punch line is that, in all probability, today's television broadcasts are not live, but are delayed.

The November 6th broadcast of *The West Wing* was widely publicized for its daring and unique approach – it was to be a “live” television debate between its

two fictional candidates running for the office of President. According to David Swerdlick writing for PopMatters:

Partly a creative experiment, and partly an effort to boost falling ratings, the broadcast absolutely had the look and feel of a real debate. There were only two commercial interruptions, allowing for a continuity of dialogue. The episode resisted the typical trappings of TV drama — there were no jump cuts following zinging one-liners, no cheesy music leading to breaks. The characters' lines were scripted and rehearsed, just like real-life candidates, but the actors also improvised, with the pauses and hiccups in their delivery adding to the impression that the debate was “real.” The debate was performed twice, aired live for both the East and West Coasts.

Yet while “liveness” of the broadcast



It looked live but it really wasn't: the candidates' debate on NBC's *The West Wing* featured (l. to r.) moderator Forrest Sawyer and the candidates portrayed by Jimmy Smits and Alan Alda.

was its primary claim to fame, let it be known that the broadcast was not live! It was delayed by 5 seconds. According to Alan Wurtzel, President of Research and Media Development for NBC, "with respect to entertainment programming which broadcast standards cover we make a determination if a live show poses a content risk which would subject the network and its affiliates to FCC fines should indecent content be broadcast and, if we decide that's the case, we use a five-second delay but the program is still labeled live. *The West Wing* debate episode was carried on five-second delay."

Let there be no misunderstanding: the specific broadcast of *The West Wing*, advertised as "live," was not "live," but it felt "live" - a feature emphasized in the production itself with its glitches, mistakes, obtrusive cameras, and the candidate actors searching for the

right words and expressions. The real-time impossibilities that generally characterize the film-like editing of most television series were absent - no jumps in action, no frozen frames, no instant switching of costumes and scenes with the magical transition of the actors. The broadcast represented a variation on a theme of "liveness," a facsimile of real liveness.

So there is a delay. To some extent there is always a delay - in a technical sense. Between transmission and reception there is an inherent momentary delay. That is the nature of mediated communication. A phenomenon that becomes even more apparent in Internet-transmitted radio and television broadcasts. The decision to extend that delay introduces a qualitative variable. Awareness of any such delay involves some degree of psychological adaptation. One pretends

there is no delay, or one does not care whether there is a delay, some prefer the delay, and some are concerned and disturbed. The “so what?” response needs to be answered. “So what if the broadcast is delayed by a couple of seconds?” One answer is that “truth in advertising” demands an honest response. A philosophical response is that the appeal of a “live” program is its unpredictability and that the likelihood of an imposed delay suggests manipulation, the expectation of the perfect performance, the awareness of a possible editorial hand in the background. Perhaps it is an issue of notice given by the producer to the consumer that can effect audience expectations and choices. The audience member could then make informed selections: know there is a delay and allow children to watch; know there is no delay and select the program for the fun of potential flaws; know what you are watching and make more informed viewing choices.

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There are arguments for and against the authenticity of the live program. Those who seek delays are those in power – from governments who want to avert the transmission of sensitive or secret information to broadcasters who need to protect themselves against government regulators to moralists who seek to protect themselves against

regulators and the outcries of public rage and sensitivity.

The British Broadcasting Corporation took the position last year that they would delay the broadcast of some “sensitive live news.”

The policy is set out in the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines, effective last July.

Caution over showing sensitive footage is not new at the Corporation but it is the first time a delay has explicitly been written into guidelines.

There is also a written commitment that “accuracy is more important than speed” in breaking news.

The Editorial Guidelines will replace the BBC Producers’ Guidelines which have been revised to reflect the new broadcasting code and the “changing media environment”.

“The guidelines are part of our contract with our audiences,” said Stephen Whittle, BBC Controller of Editorial Policy.

The length of such delays is not clear or precisely articulated. The

delay—the length of which will be left to the discretion of the editor in charge—would allow time to exclude any potential material.

What is lost in this policy is the public’s right not to be subjected to it, nor is there a means by which the public would be aware of the practice. Implicit

is the tacit acceptance that some things are best not broadcast in the name of the public's or government's interest. It is virtually impossible to ascertain the scope of government surveillance of public telephony and computer use; it is also very difficult to determine delay, although it is sometimes possible to detect editing as a result of delayed transmission.

When did the assumption that the image on the television screen was live shift to the assumption that it was pre-recorded? The "kine" (kinescope) was the first method of television recording. Created by placing a motion-picture camera in front of a television monitor and recording the image off the monitor's screen, the quality was relatively poor, discouraging recording and rebroadcast. The kine was used on a limited basis in an effort to save money, but the shift to film, which produced a higher-quality product, ushered in an era of more widespread recording.

The demise of the kinescope for entertainment programming has been attributed to the *I Love Lucy* show and its producers Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball. Arnaz and cinematographer Karl Freund devised a method of recording performances on film using three cameras to record live action and later editing. The result was a better-quality recording that could be replayed throughout the country and encouraged reruns. By 1955 *Broadcasting* magazine reported that DuMont had transformed itself into a film-based network, using Electronicam, which combines a TV camera with a film camera, and reserving live transmission for special events and sports.

The first videotape recorder (VTR) was successfully developed by AMPEX

in 1951, allowing live images from television cameras to be captured by converting the information into electrical impulses and saving the information onto magnetic tape; but it was not until the spring of 1956 that AMPEX introduced the first practical videotape system of broadcast quality. The three networks placed orders for Ampex VTRs, and by October of that year CBS became the first network to install the system at Television City in Los Angeles to record the evening news and rebroadcast the tape to West Coast stations three hours later. Videotape then moved into the production of network television entertainment programming when Jonathan Winters, on NBC-TV, used videotape to play two characters in the same skit in an otherwise live broadcast.

By 1975 most entertainment programming was scripted and taped. *Saturday Night Live* rose to success, in part, on the novelty of its unplanned and immediate character which was said to give the show its edge. "By returning to TV's live roots, *SNL* gave its audiences an element of adventure with each program," said Geoffrey Hammill in a publication issued by the Museum of Broadcast Communication. "It acquainted the generations who never experienced live television programming in the 1950s with the sense of theatre missing from pre-recorded programming."

Potentially all broadcasts may be delayed or rebroadcast but currently some programs are more "live" than others, particularly sports broadcasting—although verification of non-delay in sports programming is difficult. Today, live entertainment programming remains atypical, used

as a device to garner ratings by such programs as the hospital drama *ER*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, *The West Wing* and *Will and Grace*. The latter went live on September 29, 2005 and again on January 12, 2006 with two performances, one for the East Coast and then for the West. Today the broadcast of a live entertainment program is an *event* replete with simultaneous blogging for comments as it progresses.

The perils of live broadcasting came to the foreground on February 2, 2004 during the halftime activities of Superbowl XXXVIII which would far outshine the athletic heroics occurring on the field. During a duet between Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake, Timberlake tore or pulled off part of Jackson's bustier exposing most of her right breast covered by a nipple shield. The repercussions were cries of dismay and shock. CNN reported NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue's response:

"The show was offensive, inappropriate and embarrassing to us and our fans. We will change our policy, our people and our processes for managing the halftime entertainment in the future in order to deal far more effectively with the quality of this aspect of the Super Bowl."

Former FCC Chair Michael Powell promised an investigation into whether CBS violated decency laws, with possible fines of up to \$32,500 applied to each television station. Powell stated:

"Like millions of Americans, my family and I gathered around the television for a celebration. Instead, that celebration was tainted by a classless, crass and deplorable stunt."

According to the FCC, in 2004

there were \$7,928,080 in fines proposed against 314 programs. By 2005 there were 189,362 complaints filed against 720 broadcast and cable programs, according to the FCC more than double the number over the previous year. These fines, perhaps more clearly than articulated regulatory policy, serve as guideposts on programming decisions.

The moral response was to threaten the installation of a virtually fail-safe system in which the American public would be protected against any future similar "catastrophe." High-profile incidents on award shows and the Super Bowl forced stations to be more aware of potential FCC sanctions in a new era of regulatory sensitivity. In *Broadcasting & Cable*, Allison Romano reported:

Around the country, local stations are installing expensive new tape-delay equipment, scouting locations in advance and warning camera crews about the potential for indecent shots...While no stations have delayed news broadcasts yet, much of what small markets consider news—parades, sporting events, town hall meetings—is being "altered" and some broadcast groups including LIN TV, NBC and CBS owned stations have installed tape delaying equipment for event and entertainment programming.

Since the type of programming affected plays a role, we suggest the following categories:

- 1) Live transmissions.
- 2) Programs where the quality of

“liveness” is not an issue – i.e., films and highly edited (filmic) features.

3) Programs in which the illusion of “liveness” is implicit, i.e., quiz shows.

For example, those of us who are *Jeopardy!* addicts are able to demonstrate our extraordinary competitive spirit outshining the contestants because *Jeopardy!* is broadcast at an earlier hour on one of the cable stations. And most of us know that the *Jeopardy!* episodes are taped many weeks before they are broadcast. Thus the outcome of Ken Jennings’s multi-million-dollar record was wrapped in a cloak of secrecy and the audience accepts the convention of “recorded immediacy”.

4) News and sports programs characterized by “mixed liveness.”

The contemporary newscast features its “live” nature conspicuously and constantly in one of the corners of the television screen. Old news is not news and “live” from the heart of the disaster or occurrence is a primary selling feature of any news program. However, the analysis of the television screen reveals a fusion of audio and video with the screen split into multiple frames and inserts. The broadcast may or may not be live. The repeatable scroll may be live but will return until replaced with a more current item. The on-site report from a global hot spot may have been recorded and will be repeated several minutes later. The next story may include a live audio report, but includes a pre-recorded filmed loop. In total what has been produced is a collage of temporally differential items.

5) Internet transmission of radio and television broadcasts presents

an additional problem in terms of “liveness” because delay is built into the computer. According to Bill Birney of Microsoft Corporation:

A broadcast delay is the difference in time between the point when live audio and video is encoded and when it is played back, and it is created primarily by the buffers that store digital media data. For example, if the buffers store a total of ten seconds of data, Windows Media Player will show an event occurring ten seconds late. Often a delay of less than twenty seconds is not a problem. However, when timing is important, Windows Media components provide a number of ways that you can minimize broadcast delay without causing a significant loss of image and sound quality.

An internet reception delay is thus built into the computer system and depending upon the amount of Random Access Memory (RAM) the computer has there is a variable delay inherent in the system.

There once was a time when delay of radio and television transmission was not an issue, because no means of capturing or recording was available. State-of-the-art technology—including satellite telephones, videophones and mobile satellite uplinks—can transmit images often in real-time from remote locations around the globe. The paradox is that with today’s broadcasting technology and its convergent support system the possibility of immediate, direct, global transmission is becoming relatively easy; at the same time, the

ability and impetus to control that transmission has increased. The relationship between producer and viewer is different when dealing with pre-recorded vs. live vs. a facsimile of a live broadcast.

The development of tape recording, DVD, streaming movie rentals, pay-

per-view and TIVO indicates a shift in scheduling to a stress on convenience and delivery. Add to this trend the blurring and ambiguity of immediacy and we see a radical shift in the character of broadcasting. It may not be the life and death of live television, but rather the re-birth of television.

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