Editing Strategies in Television News Documentaries

by Richard J. Schaefer

This study describes the editing techniques used in four renowned television news documentaries that aired between 1954 and 1982. It is informed by Peirce’s theories of signs, and realist and symbolic film theory, as well as some of the understandings common to broadcast journalists. The analysis attempts to bridge subdisciplinary boundaries to advance an accessible vocabulary for discussing journalistic representational strategies. The prevalence of continuity and thematic editing styles, special transitional effects, audio track synchronization, and differing cutting rates was quantitatively analyzed and linked to classic film realism and montage strategies. The quantitative findings and a comparative case study analysis of the structural nuances of each documentary illustrate the variety of representational strategies used by network journalists. These findings are discussed in light of analysts’ assertions that televised reports have become increasingly journalist centered.

News Routines and Formats

For decades, culturally oriented critics have studied the routine practices of print and broadcast journalists. Altheide and Snow (1979), Epstein (1973), Glasser and Ettema (1989), McManus (1994), and Tuchman (1972, 1978) examined journalism from the broader context of organizational and professional routines. Their studies provide a functionalist alternative to journalists’ understandings of news work. The researchers described determinations of news value, attempts to balance sources, and objective styles of representation as efforts to deflect criticism and legitimate news practices. By naturalizing their
professional routines, network journalists were able to meet commercial imperatives by producing news and documentary reports more efficiently.

In light of this ethnographic perspective and a belief in the media's social responsibilities, other researchers have relied on an information transmission model to examine journalistic representations. Gans (1979), Gitlin (1980), the Glasgow University Media Group (1982), Graber (1988), Gunter (1987), and Robinson (1986) used content analyses and reception studies to support claims that standard journalistic practices often fail to meet their full potential for conveying information.

Patterson (1993) turned to longitudinal content comparisons when considering press performance. He described recent political coverage as becoming increasingly negative and journalist centered. This more negative style privileges journalists' voices over those of the politicians and others featured in news reports. Thus, even the journalistic practice of previous decades has been used as a basis for evaluating contemporary press practices.

Several researchers also have combined longitudinal methodologies and content analysis to study the selection of televised political sound bites (Adatto, 1990; Hallin, 1991; Smith, 1989; Steele & Barnhurst, 1995). The researchers generally saw significant differences between the editing strategies of previous decades and those used in coverage of more recent campaigns. Most of these studies focused on a single editing variable, shot length. Adatto (1990) reported that from 1968 through 1988, the average network sound bite for presidential candidates decreased from more than 30 seconds to approximately 10 seconds. The sound bite researchers agreed with popular critics, who claimed that using such short candidate snippets made it more difficult for candidates to present their positions adequately or to discuss complex issues. Authentic clips of candidates and other news subjects can be sliced into small pieces and woven into tight, coherent reports that express the ideas of the journalists, rather than those of the news subjects. The fast pacing and cynical perspective evident in these news stories have been criticized for appealing more to ratings and the celebrity status of journalists than to high-minded notions of informing the public (Fallows, 1996).

Such studies go to the heart of the complexities surrounding journalistic representation. If the representational structure of journalistic reports is as significant as their contents, then structure itself needs to be systematically analyzed. Yet, there is no clear consensus on precisely which aspects of news representations are most crucial. Industry insiders (Moyers, 1989) and outsiders (Berkowitz, 1990) have described television journalism as being overly concerned with visuals, covering photo opportunities and stories that provide good pictures at the expense of less visually stimulating reports. Yet, Griffin (1992) maintains that, when visuals are not readily available, formatting routines still make it possible for journalists to produce conventional reports on a topic. Thus, broadcast journalists can rely on specific types of shots and editing strategies to construct visually stimulating narratives long after a newsworthy or historic event has occurred. According to Griffin (1992):
An experienced videographer knows the kinds of shots that will be needed in the editing process. In addition to framing the familiar “stand-ups” of reporters “on the scene” and the “talking heads” of interview subjects, the camera person looks for establishing shots of the relevant scene or location, cut-ins that can serve to illustrate details, and cut-aways that will provide a variety of camera angles, editing transitions, and cover shots necessary for constructing narrative. (p. 134)

Griffin (1992) also wrote that the journalistic norm of authenticity prohibits fictionalized news footage, or footage covertly staged for the camera, as well as manipulation of previously shot footage to alter its appearance. If that happens, then the authenticity of the news footage, as an accurate representation of actual places and events, becomes compromised, and a news organization’s reports lose much of their authority. Journalists are among the first to cry foul whenever they become aware of the covert use of staged or manipulated imagery (Carter, 1983; “Mr. Salant’s Letter,” 1971).

Rearranging and recontextualizing authentic images through editing, though, is considered an integral part of the television journalist’s profession (Curtin, 1993; Drew & Caldwell, 1985). Unfortunately, the complexity of even simply edited television reports has been an impediment to researchers. Furthermore, television journalists have not yet developed a fully detailed or consistent vocabulary for describing even the most routinely used editing techniques (Schultz, 1991; P. Williams, personal communication, April 13, 1991). Therefore, Griffin (1992) called for adapting the analytical language and tools of cinema studies to examine the work of broadcast journalists.

This study followed Griffin’s (1972) recommendation by drawing upon Peirce’s (1940) semiotics, realist and discursive montage film theories, and some of the concepts routinely used and articulated by professional television journalists to describe the editing strategies used in four renowned news documentaries. It illustrates how journalists working within the network news tradition used a variety of editing strategies to construct powerful, editorially pointed reports.

**Peirce’s Semiotics and Film Theory**

In his semiotic work, Peirce (1940) distinguished between the iconic, indexical, and symbolic qualities of signs. Iconic signs bear a resemblance to and convey many of the details and characteristics of the objects they represent. Indeed, photographic signs are icons because they look like the objects they represent. Peirce wrote that photographic signs were also indexical, because the photograph is a by-product or trace of the thing it represents (much as a footprint communicates a step and a weathervane signifies wind direction). Signs can also have symbolic qualities that convey arbitrary and conventional meanings. Symbolic meaning is not derived from a sign’s relationship to actual events so
much as its conventional usage and propositional appropriateness within a broader semiotic argument.

According to Peirce (1940), the three different qualities of signs are not exclusive. A visual image may have a combination of iconic, indexical, and symbolic overtones. The iconic and indexical qualities of contemporary imaging technologies, including film and video, have enabled audiovisual signs to rival the written transcript and written description as the most accurate representations of events. This “camera of record” approach is based on the detail evident in film and video representations and journalistic guarantees that the images are authentic.

Seemingly authentic press images can be misleading if the process of production and presentation allows for staging, after-the-event manipulations, or insidious selection and presentation of recorded images. In these cases, viewer assumptions with regard to the authentic indexical qualities of the image would reinforce what might be considered a deceptive expression (Nichols, 1991) or, at the very least, could blur the boundaries between fictional and nonfictional representation (Nichols, 1994).

Journalistic conventions discourage fictional interpretations by stressing the indexical qualities of recorded visual icons as evidentiary traces of actual places, people, and events. These indexical norms, when coupled with audience predispositions about the camera not lying, add authority to conventional journalism reports. However, by juxtaposing authentic images or film clips in an edited sequence, journalists can also construct a predominantly symbolic visual argument even if it is made up of very detailed icons. The interpretation of the imagery’s symbolic meaning is likely to be driven by convention and the context in which the images are presented.

Some contemporary film theorists (Deleuze, 1986, 1989; Nichols, 1991; Silverman, 1983) have built upon Peirce’s (1940) semiotic theories. However, they were not the first film analysts to consider the ideological implications of film styles. During the 1920s and 1930s, Russian formalists explored the discursive possibilities of classic, modernist, and avant-garde film techniques. Dziga Vertov (1984) used motion picture technology in an avant-garde manner to extend human perception. His nonfictional images were premised on a documentary realism that rejected actors, literary scenarios, or directorial control of a scene. His work emphasized the iconic and indexical qualities of the film medium. Vertov also used time-lapsed footage, slow motion, reverse action, and many other film techniques to depict realities that were hidden from normal perception (Michelson, 1984, pp. xxv–xlvi). His relentless filmic experimentation destroyed the temporal and visual illusions that came to be an essential element of classic cinema. Quickly paced editing and special effects marked Vertov’s films as overtly self-conscious technical constructions.

Sergei Eisenstein (1949) based his seminal principles of montage on the dialectics of Hegel and Marx. Following Hegelian principles, he described each film edit as a dialectical process, a collision of shots with disparate or even contradictory meanings. These individual shots, each with their own thesis or significance, are united through the edited transition to produce new meanings.
(a synthesis of the two images). Dialectical editing unifies the conflicts between shots and sequences into a coherent ideological message. Thus, Eisenstein’s films invite moviegoers to participate in an intellectual, as well as a perceptual, process that encourages viewers to abstract the film’s themes and intellectual message through its far more palpable plot and represented actions. This modernist viewing impulse is similar to developing historical consciousness from the raw events of daily life. The viewer’s intellect collaborates with the filmmaker’s formal crafting to produce the film’s ideologically loaded messages.

Eisenstein (1949) recognized that film’s iconicity at times made such intellectual interpretations problematic. Film images seem concrete, and therefore, often work against formal or symbolic synthesis. Like D. W. Griffith, Eisenstein often used classic filmic techniques and compelling plots. Eisenstein, however, balanced these naturalistic elements with more formal shooting and editing strategies, maintaining that editing could construct rhythms and formal overtones that would pattern viewers’ thoughts and reinforce the thematic unity of a film. Although classic, naturalistic filmmakers used close-up shots to change viewpoint and move a scenario forward, formalist montage often used close-ups to isolate a symbolic image from its environment (Eisenstein, 1949, p. 242). This, in turn, emphasized a symbolic reading of the imagery.

Pudovkin (1960), like Eisenstein, attempted to take full advantage of film’s symbolic, iconic, and indexical qualities. Pudovkin developed a typology of what he called “relational” montage techniques. His typology identified specific types of juxtapositions that emphasized imagery’s symbolic qualities to build abstract meanings progressively.

Sometime after Pudovkin (1960) wrote about relational editing, film theorist Rudolph Arnheim (1967) incorporated Pudovkin’s editing theories into an expanded typology of thematic editing practices. According to Arnheim, contrast montage juxtaposed images whose themes or symbolic meanings were antithetical. The images were visual antonyms. Similarity montage juxtaposed images whose literal or symbolic contents were in some way similar. Synchronistic montage associated images that occurred simultaneously, but in different places. Temporal montage conveyed a sense of temporal change by showing similar locations or subjects at various points in time. Leitmotiv, or recurrent theme montage, reiterated an image or image string that already had been presented—something like a musical refrain. Parallel montage alternated between images that were apparently unrelated. The unrelated clips soon would be associated by their recurrent juxtapositioning. Both Arnheim and Pudovkin described these montage editing techniques as the essential building blocks for communicating abstract concepts from far more concrete and specific photographic icons.

Other film theorists (e.g., Bazin 1967, 1971; Kracauer, 1960), however, argued that symbolic montage went against the iconic qualities of the medium. Bazin and Kracauer described realism as the natural birthright of photography and film. They claimed that it was the best style for presenting narrative scenarios. Instead of emphasizing filmmakers’ abilities to construct symbolic arguments, the realist theorists believed that film was best suited to recording
and presenting otherwise unseen image-scenes with all their iconic detail, complexity, and incoherence.

Because Kracauer (1960) embraced concrete realism, he described fantastic fiction, staging, and obvious technical manipulation as misuses of the medium. Artificial visual effects, sound effects, narration, and the inclusion of musical tracks departed from cinema’s realist strengths. In contrast to such obvious manipulations, classic continuity editing techniques went hand in hand with Kracauer’s realist approach to film. These continuity techniques reinforced realism by supporting the illusion that scenes were seamlessly captured, condensed, and represented. Bazin (1967) even claimed that, after sound-film production techniques had been fully assimilated in the 1930s and 1940s, symbolic montage had been all but eliminated from European and U.S. feature films.

Continuity editing is indeed a marker of the classic cinema style. It enables filmmakers to compress time and portray artificial spatial relationships within a scene. When continuity techniques are done well, the scene’s edits appear to be nearly invisible. This encourages viewers to follow the plot and the unfolding action, rather than dwell on a show’s theme or the manner of its construction. Television production scholars (Compesi & Sheriffs, 1985; Curtin, 1993; Drew & Caldwell, 1985) noted that careful shooting and editing are required to build continuity sequences. The successive cuts within continuity scenes must conform to the 180-degree and 30-degree rules. According to the 180-degree rule, when editing two shots together, the subjects of those shots must retain their relative screen positions. The 30-degree rule warns filmmakers to avoid cutting between two shots that are too similar in terms of subject, angle of view, and camera position.

When the codes of authenticity and the techniques of continuity editing are competently followed, journalistic film or video products will appear to be transparent and naturally flowing renditions of a scene. The depicted sense of immediacy and realism can obscure much of the carefully constructed narrative in the edited journalistic reports.

The whole editing process is further complicated by the presence of sound. News crews typically record two separate audio tracks when they shoot footage on location. Even the most primitive professional news-editing suites can mix the two tracks together, edit them separately, or mix narration, music, or other sound effects to produce a single multilayered audio track. Although viewers at home hear the mixed audio track through a single speaker, both the visual and the various audio tracks can be edited either to reinforce or undermine a report’s realism.

In his discussion of audio aesthetics, Zettl (1990) differentiated between synchronous sounds, which appear to be recorded along with the visual image, and asynchronous sounds, which appear to originate outside the visual frame. Synchronous sounds can help naturalize audiovisual imagery as a multisensory representation of a material reality, whereas asynchronous sounds (narration, music, and voice-overs) may undermine the effect of realism by adding an unnatural dimension to a scene. In more traditional theories of representation,
including classic realist film theory, the primary creative act is the act of framing and selecting the images, not the act of their manipulation and manufacture.

Naturalizing the connection between the image and the particular attributes of a real object or scene emphasizes the iconic and indexical aspects of representation. Some more contemporary film theorists have acknowledged their filmmaking counterparts’ efforts to undermine such naturalizing conventions. Ulmer (1983) described unnatural, self-conscious fragmentation and rearrangement of audiovisual imagery as an indicator of postmodern notions of collage or montage.

In his complex analysis of feature films’ styles, Deleuze (1989) outlined a significant distinction between Eisenstein’s (1949) traditional ideologically driven montage and a more contemporary and even more self-conscious use of montage. Within both conceptions, film images are building blocks in an intricately structured mosaic that redefines the indexical ties of the imagery, as meaning slips and slides with the image’s placement in the sequence. Thus, in Eisenstein’s traditional montage, the individual fragments of imagery can still retain strong indexical overtones, even though the assembled sequence may convey an abstract symbolic meaning.

An image of President Lyndon Johnson signing the Civil Rights Bill with Martin Luther King next to him, has iconic and indexical overtones that make it easily recognizable and tie it to that particular historic event. Yet, merely mixing a sound track with the image introduces more complex indexical traces that create a new meaning. For example, if a helicopter sound was gradually mixed in so that it became louder and louder, the meaning of the sequence would change from referencing the signing ceremony for the Civil Rights Bill to a more abstract concept. Instead of being tied to a concrete historical event, the imagery with the helicopter track might suggest the tragic aspects of LBJ’s short-lived popularity and the Vietnam War’s interference with Great Society programs. Recollections of Francis Ford Coppola’s helicopter footage in Apocalypse Now and aerial news footage from Vietnam would color the imagery. Such traditional montage is dependent on both indexical and conventionally driven symbolic interpretations of the imagery. In the end, the images themselves can be reinforced as indexes, albeit indexical fragments that convey great symbolic meaning.

Deleuze (1989) also described a still more discursive and self-conscious type of montage that has been used by a few avant-garde feature filmmakers. This montage calls into question the highly conventionalized interpretation of the images themselves, and deconstructs the images’ indexical ties to specific times and places. It relies on signs playing upon other signs in a far more discursive and unconventional manner than traditional montage. The self-conscious, avant-garde montage is extremely demanding of audiences, because it forces an abandonment of conventional narrative so that the new abstract understandings can be realized. It is these understandings that strip the images of much of their indexical and conventional overtones, replacing them with a new symbolic significance.

If shots of the Reverend King and President Johnson signing the Civil Rights
Bill were intercut with shots of King lounging in swimming trunks and laughing by the side of a pool, the audience would have to confront a more difficult, perhaps seemingly irrational, sequence. The shots of King clowning at pool side would encourage viewers to question conventional depictions of King playing the role of moral and political leader. The iconic and thematic weight of the public image cliché of the serious King would be undermined by the poolside shots. Just as the conventional use of imagery tends to restrict meaning, the inclusion of unconventional images in an avant-garde montage invites more self-conscious and open interpretation of filmic sequences. By calling into question the cliché images of King the public figure, the iconic and realistic qualities of all such symbolic clichés are undermined. The sequence would encourage the audience to adopt a more critical and playful postmodern frame of mind. In short, the symbolic meanings of the images would be altered to reflect a more complex symbolic understanding of King’s public and private roles.

Thus, the structuring of materials through editing can significantly influence the contents and meaning of the reports. Continuity editing techniques, along with the use of synchronous sounds, help journalists to emphasize the correspondence between authentic images and real, concrete events. Such readings coincide with a classic realist frame of interpretation. On the other hand, montage techniques, along with the use of asynchronous audio tracks, suggest that the medium has been crafted symbolically to convey an abstract audiovisual message. This more discursive use of the medium draws upon both traditional dialectical and more avant-garde postmodern representational strategies. The presence of such symbolic strategies suggests that broadcast journalism can be far more than a simple window on the world. Their use reflects the extent to which television journalists overtly construct complex arguments.

**Method**

This study examined four significant and well-distributed works from a single broadcast journalism genre. It utilized a case study approach reinforced by a quantitative analysis of four editing variables to reveal the programs’ varied editing strategies. Therefore, it explored a frequently overlooked structural aspect of broadcast journalism.

*The Documentaries*

Each of the four documentary telecasts aired during different periods in a genre that scholars have labeled the prestige documentary (Bluem, 1965; Carroll, 1978; Freed, 1972; Rosenthal, 1988). The four programs were chosen, in part, because they achieved such notoriety that much has been written about them. The programs are still available for viewing in many public and university libraries. This makes it possible for readers to see the documentaries for themselves.

The four programs were the *Report on Senator McCarthy* (Friendly, 1954);
News Documentaries

Harvest of Shame (Lowe, 1960); The Selling of the Pentagon (Davis, 1971); and The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception (Crile, 1982). These four prestige documentaries have come to be recognized as landmarks in the history of editorially pointed broadcast journalism. All had their editorial choices and editing techniques contested at the time of release. Those attacks on the programs forced the producers and other journalists to offer public comments on production practices. This has created a vast body of easily accessible contextual material on the documentaries (see, e.g., Benjamin, 1988; Carter, 1983; Friendly, 1967; Kendrick, 1969; Kowet, 1984; Seldes, 1954; Sperber, 1986). Scholars also have written critical analyses, ethnographies, and histories of the broadcasts (e.g., Alexander, 1988; Jowett, 1983; Leab, 1983; Rogers & Clevenger, 1971; Rosteck, 1994; Schaefer, 1994, 1995; F. L. Smith, 1972; W. E. Smith, 1989; Willis, 1987; Yeager, 1956). These secondary source materials provided a wealth of contextual information on each program’s production practices and its practitioners. Finally, the analysis was informed by interviews conducted with CBS journalists, producers, and managers associated with the productions (i.e., G. Crile, personal communication, May 30, 1991; P. Davis, personal communication, April 22, 1991; J. Schultz, personal communication, April 15, 1991; P. Williams, personal communication, April 13, 1991).

Coding

The programs were coded on a shot-by-shot basis. This allowed four formal variables to be tabulated for each visual transition in the documentaries. The following four variables were tabulated, because, when taken in combination, they provide insights into the prevalence of realist and montage editing strategies:

1. Shot length: The duration in seconds and tenths of seconds of each visual image. This variable indicates cutting rate, or how many visual edits were made per minute. High cutting rates suggest more overtly artificial and fragmented editing strategies. Low cutting rates suggest a less fragmented “camera of record” approach to representation.

2. Use of straight cuts or special effect edits: Whether visual transitions used cut edits or more elaborate special effects, such as dissolves or fades. Frequent use of the latter would typically convey a sense of artificiality and reduce classic continuity realism.

3. Style of visual edit: Whether the visual edit was a continuity edit, a montage edit, a jump cut or transitional edit, or an edit that had no apparent visual logic. Transitions between shots recorded at a single site and without any apparent breaks in action were characterized as continuity edits. Montage edits reinforced traditional or avant-garde symbolic understandings. If a transition could have been characterized as both a continuity and montage edit, it was counted only as a continuity technique, because its use in the continuity sequence fostered a more iconic and indexical realistic interpretation. Jump cuts make viewers aware that an event has been condensed through editing. Thus, they destroy the illusion of continuity. Transitional edits are sometimes considered a particular type of continuity edit. They typically begin with an exterior...
shot of a building or outside detail, and then transition to a shot of a scene inside the building. Finally, some transitions between shots lacked a clear visual logic and were therefore labeled as such.

(4) Audiovisual synchronization: Whether or not the primary audio track was edited with synch sound that appeared to have been recorded with the visual image. This synchronized sound would reinforce realistic interpretations. Sounds that appeared not to have been recorded on location with the visual image, and were presumably added during the editing stage, were categorized as asynchronous. The presence of such overlaid asynchronous sounds reinforces a more artificial and symbolically complex editing strategy.

Shot percentages for each program were calculated from the total number of visual transitions in the documentary. Copies of the original broadcasts were not available, so film versions of the programs were used in the textual analysis. These films were transferred onto videotape, time coded, and reviewed on television monitors. Although the original broadcast versions and the available film copies of the documentaries were nearly identical, the documentaries analyzed here did not include the commercial breaks, as well as announcer lead-ins to those breaks, that viewers of the original broadcasts might have seen.

Coding specific editing variables enabled the analysis to go beyond subjective assertions and easily recognizable editing patterns. A calculation of intercoder reliability based on a stratified random sample of shot coding across the four documentaries (n = 147) revealed an overall agreement rate of 93.2% for the four variables, with the following individual breakdowns: shot length, 95.2%; straight cut/special effect, 98.6%; style of visual edit, 84.4%; and audiovisual synchronization, 94.6%.

Quantitative Analysis of Editing Techniques

Table 1 provides the running time and total number of visual transitions for the broadcasts. The table shows that each of the documentaries varied in length, as well as cutting rate. The Report on Senator McCarthy had much longer duration shots (M = 17.5 seconds), and, therefore, a slower cutting rate (3.4 shots per minute) than any of the other documentaries. Editing rates increased dramatically in the later documentaries. The 1971 documentary, The Selling of the Pentagon, had the fastest editing rate (8.8 shots-per-minute).

Table 1. Shot Length and Editing Rates in the Four Documentaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>McCarthy</th>
<th>Harvest</th>
<th>Pentagon</th>
<th>Enemy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program length (min.:sec.)</td>
<td>25:56</td>
<td>51:50</td>
<td>50:12</td>
<td>72:37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of visual transitions</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average shot length (sec.)</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median shot length (sec.)</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting rate (shots-per-min.)</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Editing rates and the treatment of subject matter were related. The extremely long duration shots in the Report on Senator McCarthy, and the relatively longer 9.8-second average shot length in The Uncounted Enemy, can be attributed to these programs’ use of long sound bites. The 1954 McCarthy broadcast had realistic clips of Senator McCarthy speaking at public occasions. Twenty-eight years later, The Uncounted Enemy also featured lengthy sound bites by former military and intelligence personnel who reflected upon enemy troop strength estimates during the Vietnam War. However, although the McCarthy sound bites indexed the senator’s tactics in Congressional hearings, the sound bites of the military officials in The Uncounted Enemy were used as elements in complex synchronistic and temporal montages that reflected back on unfilmed events from 15 years earlier. In both cases, these long uncut sound bites accounted for the great discrepancy between the average and median shot lengths in McCarthy (17.5 vs. 9.6 seconds), and The Uncounted Enemy (9.8 vs. 5.5 seconds). The Uncounted Enemy’s mean and median shot times would have been even longer if the program’s extremely long sound bites were not tempered by a series of fast-paced montage sequences, and continuity-edited scenes of combat in Vietnam.

The overall pacing of television documentaries and other programming is generally believed to have been much slower in the predominantly live television era of the 1950s than in subsequent decades. As film production techniques and videotape were introduced, far more programs were preedited rather than switched live. This allowed the editing rates of all programming to increase. Palmer Williams (personal communication, April 13, 1991), operations manager for See It Now and executive producer of the CBS Reports documentary

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**Table 2. Straight Cuts and Special Effects in the Four Documentaries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual Transition</th>
<th>McCarthy Freq (Pct)</th>
<th>Harvest Freq (Pct)</th>
<th>Pentagon Freq (Pct)</th>
<th>Enemy Freq (Pct)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Straight cut between shots</td>
<td>89 (100)</td>
<td>409 (99.8)</td>
<td>436 (96.2)</td>
<td>389 (89.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total special effects transitions</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (0.2)</td>
<td>17 (3.8)</td>
<td>48 (11.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. dissolves</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (0.2)</td>
<td>1 (0.2)</td>
<td>43 (9.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. fades</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>13 (2.9)</td>
<td>3 (0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. wipes</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2 (0.5)</td>
<td>(0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. superimpositions / freezes</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (0.2)</td>
<td>2 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Transitions</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The frequencies for total special effects transitions includes dissolves, fades, wipes, and superimpositions/freezes.
series, suggested that the increased rate of editing by news organizations in the 1960s and 1970s was driven by commercial rather than technological or informational concerns. Williams said that journalists increased the pacing of their work to make it more attractive to larger audiences.

Table 2 shows that the use of special effects (i.e., fades, wipes, dissolves, superimpositions, and freeze frames) increased in each successive documentary. The Report on Senator McCarthy relied most heavily on realistic straight cuts, or butt edits, to sequence its shots. However, in the following three documentaries, reliance on realistically coded visual transitions gave way to a fuller transitional repertoire that included overtly artificial dissolves and other special effects.

Table 3 indicates that the first documentary used continuity editing to a much greater extent than any of the others, and the 1982 program used continuity the least. Of the visual transitions in the Report on Senator McCarthy, 71.9% were continuity edited. Only 44.6% of the edits in The Uncounted Enemy evidenced continuity. Harvest of Shame had the greatest percentage of edits that were coded as jump cuts or transitional continuity edits. Jump cuts can make viewers aware that an event was condensed through editing—that footage was taken out of the finished product. Production personnel (Schultz, personal communication, April 15, 1991; Williams, personal communication, April 13, 1991) maintained that Harvest of Shame’s jump cuts could be attributed to Producer David Lowe’s inexperience in conducting on-camera interviews for continuity editing. Transitional continuity edits typically involve exterior shots of a structure that lead into continuity sequences of events occurring inside the structure. This old filmic technique was far more commonly used in Harvest of Shame than in the other three documentaries.

Table 3 indicates that each subsequent program had a greater percentage of edits that were not visually related, going from 5.6% in 1954 to 14.0% in 1982. This suggests that the producers of each of the later programs were more inclined to build those programs in blocks and use abrupt visual changes to join the edited blocks. Table 3 also indicates that there was a steady increase in the use of montage editing techniques in each subsequent documentary. The percentage of montage transitions more than doubled from the first documentary (16.9%) to the last (38.2%).

### Table 3. Style of Visual Edit in the Four Documentaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Visual Edit</th>
<th>McCarthy</th>
<th>Harvest</th>
<th>Pentagon</th>
<th>Enemy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuity transitions</td>
<td>64 (71.9)</td>
<td>215 (52.4)</td>
<td>256 (56.5)</td>
<td>195 (44.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montage transitions</td>
<td>15 (16.9)</td>
<td>113 (27.6)</td>
<td>143 (31.6)</td>
<td>167 (38.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jump cuts/transition shots</td>
<td>5 (5.6)</td>
<td>48 (11.7)</td>
<td>13 (2.9)</td>
<td>14 (3.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not visually related</td>
<td>5 (5.6)</td>
<td>34 (8.3)</td>
<td>41 (9.1)</td>
<td>61 (14.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Transitions</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
News Documentaries

When the synchronization of the audio and visual tracks is considered, each successive documentary moved further away from a production strategy dominated by realism. Table 4 shows that 85.4% of the shots in the Report on Senator McCarthy contained synchronized audio and visual tracks. Rarely were narration and other sounds, which were recorded apart from the visual track, mixed over the film clips of McCarthy. However, the use of realistically coded imagery declined drastically with Harvest of Shame (50.2%), and dipped a little further in The Selling of the Pentagon (45.9%). Finally, The Uncounted Enemy (29.8%) demonstrated another steep decline in synchronization of the audio and visual tracks, as narration and other overtly asynchronous audio tracks were used to modify the program’s authentic images.

Thus, the four programs used different ratios of classic realism and montage techniques. The frequent use of longer duration shots, synchronous sound, and continuity editing in The Report on Senator McCarthy indicates that it was most heavily indebted to classic realism. The subsequent documentaries used various montage editing strategies, asynchronous sound layering, and more overtly constructionist techniques. This suggests that the later programs emphasized the symbolic aspects of their imagery.

### Production Techniques of the Documentaries

Subject matter and individual producer preferences influenced the construction of the four documentaries. The relatively slow pacing (3.4 cutting rate) of the 1954 McCarthy broadcast could be partly attributable to the fact that Executive Producer Edward R. Murrow rejected the quick-paced editing style common to the newsreels of the 1940s and 1950s (Yeager, 1956, p. 202). Instead, Murrow adopted a more classic realist strategy that relied on the iconicity and indexicality of “camera of record” footage of McCarthy acting like a political bully.

This classic realist approach was practical because, as a prominent newsmaker, Senator McCarthy left a trail of authentic film images in his wake. Murrow and Producer Fred Friendly were able to collect those images and

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**Table 4. Audiovisual Synchronization in the Four Documentaries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Synchronization</th>
<th>McCarthy (Freq, Pct)</th>
<th>Harvest (Freq, Pct)</th>
<th>Pentagon (Freq, Pct)</th>
<th>Enemy (Freq, Pct)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asynchronous</td>
<td>12 (13.5)</td>
<td>204 (49.8)</td>
<td>245 (54.1)</td>
<td>306 (70.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame or scene connected</td>
<td>76 (85.4)</td>
<td>206 (50.2)</td>
<td>208 (45.9)</td>
<td>130 (29.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No primary sound</td>
<td>1 (1.1)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Shots with Audio</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>436</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. One shot in McCarthy and one shot in Enemy lacked primary sound.
select clips that showed McCarthy abusing his congressional powers. Although Murrow’s live lead-ins provided some critical context for the authenticated clips, the images of McCarthy were presented in a seemingly unmanipulated manner. This technique emphasized the indexicality of the images as traces of real events. Thus, rather than Murrow merely issuing a subjective attack on McCarthy, the senator’s own actions appeared to be presented for viewers to judge for themselves.

Television critic Gilbert Seldes (1954) criticized this representational strategy because it showed McCarthy at his worst, without including balancing shots of McCarthy at his best. Seldes claimed that the use of realistically encoded images lent authority to an editorially loaded technique that could be used to damage the reputation of any public figure.

In comparison, Harvest of Shame used a far more complex combination of continuity and traditional montage techniques to expose the terrible plight of migrant farm workers in the United States. The program’s broad sociological themes were visually grounded in a series of continuity-edited sequences that depicted several different groups of migrants. The squalid living and working conditions of migrant families from the East, Midwest, and West were documented during much of the 1959–1960 agricultural harvest season, as the migrants traveled from the southern states to the northern states and then back again.

The continuity sequences of the migrant families from different parts of the country were edited into a series of synchronistic montages that illustrated the broad sweep of the U.S. migrations. Temporal montages of the families and repeated images of migrants traveling in crowded trucks and buses were used to document the relentless transience and drudgery of migrant life. The layering of these montage sequences with present-tense narration reinforced the cyclical and timeless nature of the annual migrations.

Through these techniques, images of a few migrant families during a single migratory season came to symbolize the squalid annual migrations of all farm workers. This complex structure encouraged viewers to jump frames from the small pictures of a few migrants to the larger sociological dimensions of the migrant problem. Skillful reliance on such inductive leaps enabled the producers to advance ethereal sociological claims that were difficult for critics to rebuff. The larger sociological arguments held up so long as the program’s indexical depictions of the individual migrant families could be defended as accurate and authentic.

The Selling of the Pentagon was built in three distinct blocks, with each illustrating a different aspect of the Pentagon’s self-serving public relations efforts. The first portion of the documentary used fast-paced, continuity-edited sequences to depict military demonstrations, displays, and speeches presented for the benefit of U.S. civilians. The third segment relied on slower paced continuity editing and some traditional montage sequences to present a series of longer interviews and sequences that showed how the Pentagon manipulated the press. Two sound bites from these segments were so fragmented and rearranged through seemingly "invisible" continuity techniques, that critics
claimed they were deceptive (“Mr. Salant’s Letter,” 1971; *Proceeding Against Frank Stanton and Columbia Broadcasting System*, 1971).

In contrast, the more innovative use of traditional and avant-garde montage in *The Selling of the Pentagon’s* second segment drew no such criticisms. That segment critiqued the Department of Defense’s (DOD) prolific and self-serving filmmaking efforts. Producer Peter Davis and Editor Dena Levitt created a fast-paced similarity montage made up almost entirely of excerpts from the hundreds of films produced by the DOD each year. These excerpts ridiculed the DOD films’ stylistic clichés—ominous symphonic music; drum rolls; red tides of communism spilling across maps of Europe and North America; deep-throated, voice-of-god narration; images of emotionless, brainwashed children; and shots glorifying the beauty of U.S. military hardware. The self-conscious assembly of these filmic clichés, one after another, not only drove home the thematic absurdity of the Pentagon films, but also served as a stylistic inoculation against the DOD’s time-worn documentary techniques. In this sense, the second segment of the broadcast moved beyond a traditional montage strategy. By presenting a ridiculous stream of images, it encouraged viewers to self-consciously deconstruct both the themes and the conventions of the DOD films. The similarity and avant-garde montages called into question the iconic, indexical, and stylistic validity of the Pentagon films.

The last of the four documentaries, *The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception*, demonstrated the greatest reliance on montage editing and asynchronous layering of audio and visual tracks. It included continuity-edited combat and protest footage from the Vietnam era, as well as a series of lengthy interviews that were tightly woven into synchronistic and temporal montages. Together, these images alleged that a tragic conspiracy had occurred some 14 years earlier. The program showed that members of the U.S. military had deceived policy makers by deliberately underestimating enemy troop strength levels prior to the bloody 1968 Tet Offensive.

*The Uncounted Enemy’s* interview sound bites were typically edited into synchronistic montages that juxtaposed military and intelligence officials reflecting upon events prior to the Tet Offensive. Months after the broadcast aired in January, 1982, critics charged that Producer George Crile’s construction of the sound bite montages had violated the indexical and authenticating norms of journalism (Benjamin, 1984, 1988; Carter, 1983; Kowet, 1984). They maintained that Crile asked sources to comment on hypothetical questions, and then used excerpts of their comments as if the statements were assertions about actual events. The producers were also criticized for editing a sound bite so that viewers were given the impression that some sources were speaking about a particular meeting, when they actually had been discussing a totally different meeting.

Thus, the indexical ties that related the sound bites to the sources’ original comments had been undermined through montage editing techniques. Yet, this indexical slippage was not apparent to casual viewers of the broadcast. It was evident only to people who had access to transcripts or other information about the original interviews. Given that critics also had questioned some of the
continuity-edited sound bites in *The Selling of the Pentagon*, it would appear that by the 1980s the indexical ties of both classic realist and traditional montage sound-bite editing had come to be carefully scrutinized.

*The Uncounted Enemy*'s interviews and other action footage also were woven into a series of temporal montages that meshed the footage shot in 1981 with narrated actuality scenes from the Vietnam War period. This skillful use of temporal montage, along with the multiple mixing of asynchronous audio tracks, enabled *The Uncounted Enemy*'s producers to emphasize the symbolic qualities of the program’s interlayered imagery. This often was achieved by downplaying indexical characteristics of the individual audio and visual clips. In this sense, it was the most symbolically and synthetically structured of the four documentaries.

**Conclusion**

The use of traditional montage and independently edited audio and visual tracks in the four documentaries appears to reinforce some press critics’ claims that there has been a noticeable rise in overtly subjective and journalist-centered reporting during the last few decades. However, it should be remembered that all these documentaries presented the strong editorial sentiments of their producers. Even the *Report on Senator McCarthy*, which was most obviously grounded in classic realism, conveyed the subjective editorial assertions of its producers. In fact, by emphasizing the indexical properties of the imagery, classic realist representations can present subjective arguments in a seemingly objective and nondiscursive manner—a manner that is even less self-evidently biased than montage strategies. Therefore, if classic realist representations are giving way to more montage-structured journalistic efforts, it would follow that observers would be more likely to notice journalists taking editorial stands in contemporary television reports.

Despite the fact that each of the subsequent documentaries relied more heavily on synthetic montage techniques than the previous documentaries, this four documentary analysis does not prove that broadcast journalists are now turning to montage over classic realism. To make that claim, it would be necessary to conduct rigorous longitudinal analyses of larger representative samples of news, newsmagazines, and documentary reports.

However, the study does show the variety of techniques used by news documentarians. It also begins to address one persistent problem facing broadcast journalism. Despite the popularity of television reports, there is no commonly embraced vocabulary for discussing editing strategies. This lack of a common vocabulary hinders critical analyses of television reporting. The vocabulary that news professionals use to describe their work is hampered by the iconic specificity of aural and visual imagery (Schultz, personal communication, April 15, 1991; Williams, personal communication, April 13, 1991). An editor in one news organization may have a subtly different understanding of what constitutes a cut shot than an editor in another news organization. Until
these often contradictory understandings become shared through continual interaction, it is far easier to describe shots by their more iconic contents than to use more generic names. Thus, it is easier to say, “We’ll use the shot of the man standing by the water cooler here,” rather than saying, “we’ll go to a cut shot,” “cutaway,” or a “reaction shot.” In this sense, both working professionals and journalistic critics have not yet embraced a common metalanguage for discussing the nuances of nonfictional editing.

Not surprisingly, popular understanding of the process has also suffered. Messaris (1994), who called montage editing techniques “propositional editing,” wrote that production strategies emphasizing the medium’s symbolic qualities are not understood by the average viewer (pp. 111–112). Casual viewers, who are unfamiliar with video production techniques, have great difficulty recognizing relatively overt propositional edits. The amount of work involved in moving from a casual to a critical analysis, along with the prevalent use of layered audio tracks and complexly edited visual tracks, befuddles most television viewers.

Some of the basic vocabulary of cinema studies used in this analysis is hardly known by the average broadcast journalism viewer, who would be at a loss to describe the difference between classic Hollywood continuity and traditional montage. Furthermore, academics who study these techniques have developed many different interpretive frames and vocabularies to describe film processes. Scholar-critics, who write about semiology and audiovisual media, might be inclined to adopt the various highly technical terminologies of Wollen (1969), Metz (1981), Deleuze (1986, 1989), or a host of European poststructuralists. These terms are not commonly embraced by scholars, let alone professional journalists and ordinary viewers.

In this study I have attempted to bridge some of these subdisciplinary boundaries by integrating baseline concepts and vocabulary from film theory, Peircian semiotics, and the jargon of professional journalists. Just as manipulating editing techniques advances the art of television reporting, using a commonly accessible vocabulary for analyzing the techniques of nonfictional editing can advance the art of “reading” television journalism.

References


