

<http://mcs.sagepub.com/>

---

## **Obsessed with the audience: breakfast television revisited**

Jan Wieten and Mervi Pantti  
*Media Culture Society* 2005 27: 21  
DOI: 10.1177/0163443705049056

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/27/1/21>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Media, Culture & Society* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://mcs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://mcs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/27/1/21.refs.html>

## Obsessed with the audience: breakfast television revisited

Jan Wieten and Mervi Pantti

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

Breakfast television<sup>1</sup> arrived in Europe on the slipstream of the new private broadcasters of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Competition and commercialization, stimulated by the break-up of public broadcast monopolies, led, among other things, to increased experimentation with new journalistic formats, many with an infotainment character. Breakfast television is commonly assumed to be one of the more recent stages in the popularization of the television news genre, and as symptomatic of the commercialization of television as a whole (Corner, 1995). The combination of information and entertainment, together with so-called coping elements, has made breakfast television susceptible to the same criticism as other forms of infotainment, such as trivializing serious news (cf. Dahlgren, 1995). Its status among media critics and professional colleagues – even if not among broadcast executives with an eye for revenue – is rather low.<sup>2</sup>

Compared to more established news and current affairs output, breakfast television as such – as a specific programme type and viewing context – has received relatively little attention from media researchers (Dickinson et al., 2001; Hack, 1999; Kessler, 1992; Wieten, 2000, 2001).<sup>3</sup> It is usually discussed next to or in comparison with other programme types, predominantly in analyses of television news (e.g. Cottle, 1993, 1995; Hallin, 1994; Harrison, 2000; Jensen, 1986; Marshall and Werndly, 2002; Scannell, 1996). The most influential work regarding breakfast television is without doubt Jane Feuer's article 'The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology' (1983), in which the author challenges Herbert Zettl's (1978) idea, as well as the industry's self-validating discourse, of liveness as the essence of television. Feuer singled out a breakfast magazine, ABC's *Good Morning America*, as the ultimate product in which

the ideology of liveness is calculated to overcome ‘the most extreme fragmentation’:

The show is obsessed with its own liveness, as symbolized by the logo with time and upcoming segment in a box. David [host David Hartman] acts as custodian of flow and regularity, the personification of a force which creates unity out of fragmentation. (1978: 16–17)

Paddy Scannell’s (1996) concept of ‘dailiness’, however, comes closer to what we see as the fundamental nature of breakfast television, of what it is, stands for and wants to achieve. As far as we can see, breakfast television is obsessed with identifying itself with the daily world of the television viewer, as far as television and a TV news magazine can ever achieve this. Its mode of address and presentation of content, its settings and props, the ways in which it tries to reconcile fragmentation and flow, and make use of ‘liveness’ and ‘time’, are functional for establishing a relationship with the morning audience, its moods, schedules and activities. Even the accompanying clock on screen – the element which touches perhaps most upon the essence of breakfast television – points away from the programme and from television to the outside world and to the daily lives of the audience.

In our view, breakfast TV finds itself positioned by the dailiness of the spectator, as the ultimate consequence of being consciously charted for early-morning viewing patterns (cf. Feuer, 1983). Though television as a whole is faced with the fact that viewing is mostly casual and intermittent, in the case of morning TV this is a much more fundamental thing. Media use in the morning is blended into a household members’ particular style of getting up and getting out (e.g. Dickinson et al., 2001). As Scannell (1996: 149; see also Hack, 1999) has pointed out, breakfast television attends to the time of day by ‘producing it as the moment it is: breakfast time, time-to-get-up, to wash, shave, dress, clean teeth, snatch a bite to eat and off to school, factory, shop, office or wherever’. From this it follows that breakfast television has consciously adopted the role of structuring and sustaining household routines, in order to become part of them.

We have chosen as our main subjects of study one edition of three commercial breakfast magazines from three different countries: ABC’s *Good Morning America* (US), GMTV’s *GMTV* (UK) and MTV3’s *Huomenta Suomi* (Finland),<sup>4</sup> but we will refer to other breakfast television shows as well. Our selection of three different breakfast magazines is based on the assumption that they share important generic characteristics with other breakfast magazines both in the USA and Europe, even if we do not go so far as claiming them to be each other’s ‘clones’.<sup>5</sup> Although our work is for the most part based on textual analysis, we attempt to show that in the case of breakfast television, perhaps more than with other programme types, there is a need to take into account the practice of viewing itself and

its social and time-related conditions. This ‘omnipresence’ of the viewer is evident in much of our secondary research material, that is, interviews with producers of breakfast television programmes in the aforementioned three countries.

There is no difference of opinion among producers of early morning news magazines about the need to take extra account of the audience because of the particular viewing context. Thus, our aim here is to specify what means breakfast television employs to establish this rapport between the audience and the programme, or, in Scannell’s (1996: 172) words, between everyone’s ‘my world’ and ‘the great world’. How does breakfast television speak to viewers who live in the my-world, not only in the broad phenomenological sense of the concept but also in a more literal sense of being still untouched by the social world? In order to find out how the diverse needs and interests of the morning audience are reflected, we shall look more closely at three building blocks of the breakfast television programmes: scheduling, styling and setting. By looking at scheduling, that is the selection, positioning and timing of the items, we try to understand how breakfast television takes account of the daily rhythms and habits of the audience. Second, we look at styling in order to find out how breakfast television creates an atmosphere that is compatible with viewers’ priorities at daybreak. Third, we look at the setting of breakfast TV to learn how breakfast television aims to reduce the distance between the world of television and the worlds of the viewers, to adapt to the audience and the transition that is made between the world of leisure and home and the outside world of work.

Unlike Feuer, whose work on *Good Morning America* we refer to, we are not trying to engage in a discussion of the ‘television-ness’ of television, that is, of the ontology or aesthetic of television. Instead we present a textual analysis, along with a historical and institutional overview, of breakfast television, which we consider to be a worthy object of study per se with a particular audience relationship.

### **Good morning Britain, Finland and America**

Regular daytime television hardly existed in Europe before the arrival of the private broadcasters in the late 1980s, except in the form of educational and children’s programmes. However, when we look beyond Europe, there is nothing new in breakfast television. *The Today Show*, the morning show with the highest ratings in the US, celebrated its 50th anniversary in January 2002, which makes it the longest-running television programme in the world. The kind of programmes commercial and public broadcasters in Europe began to broadcast in the early morning hours resembled each other, and were obviously inspired both by a format that already existed in

radio broadcasting and by the American examples. Breakfast television programmes, which are broadcast somewhere in the 5:30 to 10 a.m. time-slot, will normally last two to three hours, and show some evolution in content, pace and style between start and finish. The emphasis on hard news is usually higher in the first part, whereas the last hour may have a lighter and softer touch.

In Britain the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) invited applications for a breakfast television franchise in 1980, expecting that 'a separate breakfast-time service, primarily of news, information and current affairs, would inject a new element into Independent Television, would meet a public need, and would be viable' (in Potter, 1990: 328). The licence went to TV-AM, which was led by a group of prominent television personalities. A few years earlier TV-AM's chairman, Peter Jay, had reproached television journalism for having a 'bias against understanding', and consequently he and his colleagues saw breakfast television as a unique opportunity to develop innovative television with 'a mission to explain' (Potter, 1990: 331–2). TV-AM only became successful, however, after these expectations had been lowered considerably. Ten years later, when licences had to be renewed, TV-AM lost its franchise to a higher bidder, Sunrise/GMTV. GMTV promised to increase the amount of serious information again, but first became notorious for stressing the 'F' (for fanciability) factor (see Franklin, 1997; Potter, 1990).

Although the initiative in Europe had been mostly with the new private broadcasters, public broadcasting usually did not lag behind for long. An important reason for developing morning TV shows has been that the provision of news and information traditionally belongs to the essential tasks of public service broadcasters, and therefore could not be left to private broadcasting alone, not even at daybreak. After the IBA had announced its intention to license commercial breakfast television in 1980, the British public broadcaster BBC reacted immediately and even managed to launch its *Breakfast Time* two weeks ahead of TV-AM. Contrary to what might have been expected, *Breakfast Time* was the more entertaining programme in the beginning. Its trademark was informality, exemplified by the brightly knitted sweaters of the hosts, a revolutionary break with the traditionally solemn attire of BBC news presenters.<sup>6</sup>

In Finland advertiser-sponsored television had existed since 1957, side by side with public service broadcasting. However, the commercial broadcaster MTV was not allowed to provide news until 1980, or to deal with topical issues in current affairs programmes until 1987 (Hellman, 1996). MTV – now called MTV3 after the third TV channel that it uses – made another inroad into television news broadcasting by launching Finland's first breakfast television programme *Huomenta Suomi* (Good Morning Finland) in 1989. Public broadcaster YLE finally responded

in 1997 with its own early morning news programme *Aamu-TV* (Morning TV).

When American network ABC produced its first early morning news show in 1975, it had to compete with NBC's successful *Today Show* and with CBS's less fortunate *Morning News*. NBC had introduced the breakfast format back in 1952 and set a standard that most of the other breakfast television programmes refer to in one way or another: for instance, the newscasts at regular intervals have become a standard feature of breakfast television. Despite extensive research of the early morning audience, ABC's first try, *A.M. America*, in 1975 was a failure, but the warm and homey *Good Morning America*, that replaced it later that same year soon became a serious competitor for the *Today Show* (Hack, 1999).

The interest and investments of the broadcasting industry in breakfast television have grown slowly but steadily with the ratings for early morning news television. During our research period (2000–1), *Good Morning America* was the second national morning news show in popularity, after the *Today Show*. In terms of ratings, breakfast television has been more successful in Britain and in Finland than in other European countries. Both countries were among the first in Europe to have forms of competition between public and private television broadcasting. GMTV, the successor to TV-AM as breakfast television broadcaster, has been the most watched early morning news provider in Britain almost since it started. MTV3's *Huomenta Suomi* can boast of its largest audience relative to the population of Finland, but in contrast to *Good Morning America*, or even GMTV, it is only marginally profitable due to the small advertising market for television in Finland (Wieten, 2002b).

Despite a shared philosophy, there are many programmatic differences between breakfast television magazines, which are related to each country, different work and commuting patterns, the remit of the broadcast organizations, surrounding programmes, etc. Traffic news, for instance, has a more prominent place in British and American early morning news than in the breakfast TV of a country with almost no traffic congestion, such as Finland. In addition, a round-up of the news in the morning newspapers is more common in Europe, with its national press, than in the US.

### **Breakfast television: audience-tailored format wrapped around news**

Breakfast television is one of the first audience-tailored news formats, if not the first one (e.g. Hack, 1999). The need for 'tailoring' has arisen from the special circumstances of the early morning. For the producers, the key question is how to reach an audience that may be large but only in theory. It seems that if this audience can be reached at all, it is usually only for a

few moments of distracted viewing. Audience research of breakfast magazines typically shows a large discrepancy between the size of the audience at any one moment and the total audience reached during the whole programme. In order to be watched and/or listened to by a rapidly shifting available audience it has to offer a wide variety of appeal.

The content of morning magazines is purposely adapted to the morning situation: the programmes offer help with household routines and provide people with what they need to know before going out, without adding to the stress of an already stressful situation. According to Steve Friedman,<sup>7</sup> who has been executive producer of both NBC's *Today Show* and CBS's *Early Show*, breakfast television has three main tasks:

Tell people what happened between the time they went to bed and time they got up. If the world is over, don't go to work or school; have a beer and lay there. Okay; don't even get out, don't even get dressed, don't go anywhere. Two, you gotta give them information they can use in their life. Money, health, et cetera. Gadgets. Internet. Whatever. People want more out of television than just staring at it. Three is a two-parter. You have to give people something to talk about when they leave, or when they get on the phone or on the Internet, and you have to give people something to smile about. Mornings are very stressful. So we have to do those three jobs.

Several authors (Allan, 1998; Moores, 1993; Scannell, 1996) have emphasized the role of broadcasting in structuring and sustaining household routines. Breakfast television is arranged to be appropriate to the circumstances of the early morning and it functions to orient viewers to the present day (Scannell, 1996: 149–50). As Margaret Morse (1986: 75) argues:

Morning news precedes the transit from the privacy of the home, where one kind of reality prevails, to the realm of work, a reality with entirely different roles, hierarchies and rules. Morning news can be used as an alarm and pacing device to speed the viewer/auditor into the rhythms of the work world; the news, however lightly attended, may also orient her/him in social reality.

Breakfast TV is aimed at serving the needs of different audience groups: adults, children, men and women. Their common denominator is a lack of time, and being absorbed with other activities as they prepare for the day ahead. Each potential audience group is attended to in some way at particular times and with different services, which could be economic news, the recipe for the day, traffic news or a cartoon.

There is a reverse side to trying to appeal to the largest possible audience: especially in small television markets, breakfast television has got into trouble because the audiences were too diverse to be of much interest to advertisers. For instance, MTV3 has responded by reducing the variety within different parts of the programme, by increasing the emphasis on news in the first part, and on lifestyle and consumer service elements in

the final part. Consequently, since the beginning of 2002 *Huomenta Suomi* has been split to a news-focused first part and a lifestyle last hour called *Ihana aamu* (Wonderful Morning). *GMTV* has gone through a similar process: it now consists of three distinct elements. The first *News Hour* contains mainly hard news items, the larger second part – *GMTV Today* – shifts to a slightly less serious and more tabloid agenda, and the last part *LK Today* is completely devoted to show business, fashion and health advice. Although such developments may be prompted by a need to deliver more defined audiences to advertisers, they take account of the fact that different people, with different activities watch at different times: working people who'll be off to work soon during the first part, and older people or housewives later during the show.

Still, regularly updated news bulletins and headlines (every half hour or even more frequently in the first part, usually less frequently towards the end) accompanied by a weather report form the main structuring element of all breakfast magazines. The other items of the magazine are, as it were, wrapped around the newscasts. At regular intervals sports, economics or other sections may be added to the newscasts. Many programmes have regular regional news inserts. All breakfast shows contain interviews with newsmakers and experts/commentators, predominantly done live in the studio (but also by phone or satellite), as well as some pre-recorded items from correspondents or reporters.

The range of subjects in breakfast television is wider than is normal in news and current affairs programmes, and would include topics from such areas as science, culture, education, environment and nature, show business, movies, literature and popular music. In *GMTV* (4 December 2001) they range all the way from a three-way interview about the situation in Israel/Palestine, discussions of health risks in food additives and an item about drink driving, via the search for a liver-donor and health tips for Christmas, to a car quiz, what's up on TV, a review of the most awful Christmas songs, and musical performances.

### **Scheduling dailiness**

To achieve compatibility between a breakfast programme and available viewers and their daily routines is a refined and difficult job. As John Ellis (1982: 119, cf. 2000) has pointed out, magazine programmes provide the most obvious examples of the segmental aspect of television. In breakfast television the segmentation belongs to the specific features of the genre, and it can be seen as an intrinsic part of its task to be appropriate to the time of day, or, more precisely, to be appropriate to an audience which is likely to watch a programme for only a split second at a time (cf. Scannell, 1996: 150). Hence, each breakfast television programme is subdivided into



numerous separate items, to allow viewers to get in and others to get out at all times. Actually, breakfast television provides an in-between option of only partially going out or getting in. Breakfast TV viewers may turn into breakfast TV listeners for a while and vice versa, cued by the constant reminders of upcoming items.<sup>8</sup>

Although there is a considerable degree of flexibility and last-minute change and improvisation in breakfast television,<sup>9</sup> not only the news but most other specific items (cooking, cartoons, performing artists, newspaper review) will be scheduled at the same time every day. At what time they will be broadcast is not so much dictated by the logic of the programme, as by the assumed diaries of the viewers.

Shifting audiences, combined with the length of the programmes, allow not only for rolling news, but also for repetition of other items in unchanged, modified or updated form.<sup>10</sup> There are limits to this, however, for each fresh audience will also be a changed audience in terms of composition and taste, and, on the other hand, a minority of the viewers will watch the whole show or most of it, and might be irritated by too many repeats. *GMTV* provides a good example, in the sense that it normally contains quite a few such modified repetitions and episodic stories. Apart from regularly returning to the news items of the day, *GMTV* contains more repetition. Hardly any of these are re-runs in an unchanged form; most resemble continuing stories, which may however be watched as one-off items, as can be seen by the selection of repeated items in Table 1. When an item is repeated it will be used in different parts of the show with different styles and flavours. In *GMTV*, more clearly than in the other two morning programmes, we see that the segment of the show in which the item is broadcast may affect (somewhat) the style in which it is presented. For instance, in the case of singer Sophie Ellis-Bextor, who was interviewed first by Fiona Phillips on *GMTV Today* and, later, by Lorraine Kelly on *LK Today*, tone and questions asked changed, together with the set and the interviewers, in accordance with the overall style of the segment.

The need to serve diverse audiences makes breakfast television programmes not only extremely fragmented, but also full of contradictions. They have to be fast-paced and relaxed at the same time. There are limits to the extent to which these internal contradictions can be overcome, in which the flow can overcome fragmentation. For the segments offered should be credible and conform to expectations within the viewing context of television. To this end, breakfast magazines tend to respect the main conventions of the different television genres that are represented in the programme. *Huomenta Suomi* (until 2000) provides a representative example. The news, every half hour, was broadcast in a traditional news setting by newsreaders; 'highly political' interviews were broadcast from the same news studio, but with one of the breakfast show anchors as interviewer,

**TABLE 1**  
**Some repeated items in GMTV, 4 December 2001**

Item	Frequency	Unchanged	Changed
Decorated house contest	5	Scene Comment	Presenters Light (from night to daylight)
Interview with mother of arrested plane spotters	2 (+ news)	Location Interviewee Topic Some Q&A Use internal monitor	Interviewer Some Q&A Light
Report on hyper-activity and E-number food additives	2	Topic Studio expert (with similar Q&A) Correspondent Locations	Studio Interviewer Interviewees Most Q&A
Interview and performance of Sophie Ellis-Bextor	2	Interviewee Live performance Some Q&A	Set Interviewer Style interview Some Q&A Music

while a more social interview would take place on the breakfast TV floor. Six or more different settings would be used for the live parts of the programme, each one being placed within its 'proper' context.<sup>11</sup> Although *Huomenta Suomi* may have been more consequent in this respect than some other shows, this seems to be common practice. Genres are not mixed up in early morning news programmes, at least not in their generic modes. This certainly seems to run against the 'contamination thesis' of the tabloidization debate, which alleges that popular news discourses are infecting the serious and worthy ones (see Fiske, 1992; Sparks, 1992).

Such contrasts are not unproblematic, because they may also scare away viewers. Therefore they need to be de-emphasized. One clash of styles, which is reproduced several times within each programme, is between the relative informality of the studio part of breakfast magazines and the conventional formality of the news broadcasts. Apart from such common bridges as '*and now to. . .*' or a brief exchange of civilities between presenters, different broadcasters have found various ingenious ways to deal with this problem. *GMTV* offers a bird's-eye camera view of the studio floor with the news desk and the breakfast magazine sofa, and a shot from behind the news desk in which both the news presenters and the magazine hosts may be seen, before going from magazine to news. Another way in which both may be integrated, or at least connected, is to let the anchors of the magazine deal with the major news events, after which

the news broadcast will contain a short factual resume of other news by the newsreader. *GMTV* and *Good Morning America*, as well as other American national breakfast television shows, use this method.

A basic pattern in breakfast TV then, is not flow overcoming fragmentation, but flow *and* segmentation. The role of the 'talent' may be crucial in this respect; this is certainly what most of the broadcasters that produce the magazines are convinced of. Breakfast hosts have to be able to play convincingly quite different roles in different settings – from 'grilling a senator' to 'grilling a steak' (Pogrebin, 1999: 111) – while remaining unchanged as a person radiating an unchanging friendliness. They embody, as it were, all the distinct features and all the internal contradictions of the genre.

### Styling normality

Unlike in evening news, the style of an interview on breakfast television is more conversation than interrogation (Marshall and Werndly, 2002; Wieten, 2002a). Adapting to the audience is not just a matter of schedule but also of style and overall tone. In a way, schedules produce the bits and pieces, but the overall tone functions to cement these together and create continuity. Daniel Hallin (1994: 92) has characterized breakfast television as being all about friendly and interesting people having conversations with other friendly and interesting people, with the viewer invited to join them. That television at the time of transition between night and day needs to be warm and friendly and reassuring, is a view widely shared by breakfast magazine producers. In the words of one producer for *Good Morning America*: 'You have to make it friendly. I don't think anyone wants to get up in the morning and be badgered.'<sup>12</sup>

The presenters play a major role in establishing the style and atmosphere of the programme. Success or failure of breakfast television is believed to rely to a large extent on the quality of the presenting team.<sup>13</sup> The relationship with the audience is based partly on the relative ease with which one can picture oneself living next door to a breakfast TV presenter, at least such is the belief of television makers, as evidenced by the explanation given by Marcy McGinnis, vice-president of news coverage at CBS, of the success of NBC's Katie Couric: 'She is not threatening, she is cute, she is not beautiful, and women like her, men like her.'<sup>14</sup> It seems that looks and age (except in programmes targeted at a young audience, such as *The Big Breakfast* or *RI:SE* in Britain and *Morning Live* in France) have a different meaning in breakfast television and are less important than likeability and normalcy.

It is precisely this normality and respectful friendliness, next to its agenda-setting potential, that has turned breakfast television into a politi-

cian's favourite. British prime minister Tony Blair has often been reproached for preferring 'a light grilling by Eamonn Holmes', host of *GMTV*, to 'a full roasting' on a more critical news programme (*Guardian, Media supplement*, 7 October 2002). Politicians may be sure that they will have the time they need to say what they want to say, and they can be assured that it will be aired in unedited form. Not just politicians, but guests in general are welcomed and spoken to as if they were members of the family or close friends. In countries where languages distinguish between less and more formal modes of address, the less formal speech mode may be used on breakfast TV, whereas the more formal one is reserved for other news and current affairs programmes.

*Good Morning America* (6 November 2000, 7:15 a.m. EST)

End of interview of co-host Charles Gibson (in studio) with presidential candidate Al Gore and his wife Tipper (outdoors in Waterloo, Iowa):

*Charles Gibson*: Mr Vice-President, Mrs Gore, thank you for joining us. Vice-President, we thank you for being so gracious as to accept our invitations so often.

*Al Gore*: Always, Charlie, thanks for having us on.

The continuity provided by the hosts clearly tells the viewer that the empathy, informality and good humour of the private sphere is the norm here (double presentation is supposed to enhance the effect), even though the presenters themselves may often have to perform roles that seem incompatible with this norm. Such instances include the solemn and formal public function of interviewer in a hard news interview, or of a presenter of a serious news event. Even on such occasions the interviewer may shift from his/her role as a journalist to another role, for example, of an involved curious viewer.

*BBC Breakfast* (9 January 2002, 7.27 a.m.)

Co-hosts Jeremy Bowen and Sophie Raworth behind desk. Live exchange between Bowen and Declan Curry from the stock exchange. Curry is seen on the internal monitor behind the presenters. Curry holds a clicker to change slides in one hand and a mobile phone-looking device in the other, which he consults from time to time.

*Jeremy Bowen*: (after Curry has presented the news from the exchange) (. . .) about your reporter style notebook, this handheld computer thing, is it any good?

*Declan Curry*: Well it stills feels a bit strange but that is because I am not used to it. We do it as a trial, to see if we can manage to save a few trees and not use quite as much paper.

*Jeremy Bowen:* Can it send messages?

*Declan Curry:* No, we get the news on it but that's about all. . . .

*Jeremy Bowen* (turning to camera): Coming up, more rare technology on this programme: here is my pen, I write with it (makes a scribble on piece of paper in front of him).

One way to reduce the distance between the audience and the programme is by demystifying television itself. In this respect early morning magazines take a different path than (other) news programmes that are expected to hide the fact that news is constructed, not self-evident (e.g. Van Zoonen, 2002). Breakfast television programmes regularly put on display the devices that are used to create suggestions of liveness, nearness and realness: cameras, lights, cameramen, floor managers and anyone else on the set may come into view and even take part in the show. Similarly, things that go wrong are dealt with in a rather casual way, and sometimes even seem to be welcomed as evidence of the un-television-like normality of early morning television.

*Good Morning America* (10 November 2000, 7.31 a.m. EST)

Co-hosts Charles Gibson and Diane Sawyer, and (at news desk) news presenter Antonio Moro

*Charles Gibson:* (. . .) but let's go to the news. Here is Antonio Moro.

*Antonio Moro:* Charles, we have a bit of a problem. We don't have a camera.

*Charles Gibson:* OK, you don't have a camera. We are going to vamp here for a few moments. I am sitting here next to a sad lady, who needs a shawl because she feels a bit of a chill. (he comforts Diane Sawyer). OK there . . .

*Antonio Moro:* OK, thank you, and (into camera) good morning . . .

Informality may also be achieved by allowing for a certain degree of casualness and irony in journalistic procedures and conventions. For instance, in *Huomenta Suomi* (25 January 2001, 6.50 a.m.) 'Field reporter' Heikki Huttunen displays some extraordinary behaviour for a television journalist. Some interviewees he does not introduce, for others he uses only nicknames. He answers questions himself and/or interrupts answers when giving orders to the cameraman, who is addressed by his first name.

*Huomenta Suomi* (25 January 2001, 6.50 a.m.)

Co-hosts Lauri Karhuvaara and Liisa Riekkii in the studio with Heikki Huttunen (another co-host of the programme) on the internal monitor behind them,

reporting on the Finnish medical helicopter service live from an airport. Huttunen interviews the managing director of 'Medi-Heli' Risto Manninen. He introduces the interviewee in a sort of laid-back way (as 'Mannisen Risto') that would never be used in the evening news. Huttunen also calls the interviewee 'dear friend' and keeps touching him (pokes his arms and taps his shoulder).

*Heikki Huttunen:* Please, sit here and you'll wet your pants, I promise.

Huttunen does not look at the interviewee while interviewing. However, he does not look at the camera either. His eyes are wandering. In the middle of the interviewee's reply the reporter suddenly leaves (the camera stays with the interviewee who is left alone to finish his reply). Then the camera picks up Huttunen who is opening and closing the doors of the helicopter, asking the cameraman to come and shoot inside.

Although a certain amount of the talk between presenters and between presenters and their guests is indeed unrehearsed and spontaneous, this does not mean that breakfast news is all improvisation and spontaneity; hosts even exchange cues beforehand about what they might say in the light-hearted opening and closing chats of the programme. Although use of a teleprompt is normally limited to newscasts, and the announcement of upcoming events on the show and programmes are largely aired direct and unedited, this does not imply that they are unscripted. In the ways in which, for instance, interviews are researched and prepared there is not too much difference between a breakfast magazine and other news and current affairs programmes.

Television may have become less and less a live medium in the sense of there being an equivalence between the time of an event and time of transmission (e.g. Feuer, 1983: 14), but in breakfast television live broadcasting is still common practice, not just 'an unfulfilled promise' (see Bourdon, 2000: 531–56). Early morning news shows have long held the position of being the first news programme of the day, and this in itself implied a larger than normal share of live items and a capacity to be flexible and to improvise. As breakfast television becomes more and more part of a 24-hour news production cycle, this news organization-driven and event-driven need to broadcast fresh and live is becoming less urgent.

The viewer–text relationship invited by the discourse of liveness in breakfast television seems different then from the one invited by ceremonial and unstructured media events, but also from (re)presentations like 'serious' television news, that is, evening news, which like breakfast television incorporates both live and taped segments.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the spectacular liveness of big media events (with high expectations of something happening; a desire to witness history in the making) or the formal liveness of evening news, liveness in breakfast television is best described as ordinary, or rather as commonplace. This means among other things that live items in the news will be announced in a typical news

fashion, that is, by a caption saying 'live' on screen, but will remain unannounced in the larger part of the breakfast magazine, where liveness is present but in a less conspicuous way in studio interviews, performances and chats between the hosts.

### Setting familiarity

The world of breakfast television is set as a familiar world, one close to home. The view through the huge windows on the first floor of the *Good Morning America* studio in New York or through the virtual windows in the studio of *GMTV* confront viewers not with the world at large but with the world in which they live their daily lives. The more inward-looking part of the studios, where most of the studio talk takes place, mimics the homes of the television viewers. As mentioned earlier, items are treated according to their proper generic conventions, but transposed to a homey setting, expressed in the idiom of home. As at home, a conversation at the kitchen table (on the set of *Huomenta Suomi*) has a different character to one in easy chairs (on the small platform in the same studio) or in front of the fireplace (in *Good Morning America*). The L-shaped sofa in front of *GMTV*'s windows situates a discussion in a different frame than the couch and easy chairs in Lorraine Kelly's cosy corner in the same studio. The day ahead is approached from the viewer's own perspective in breakfast television.

The hosts, and to some extent also the other people who appear in a breakfast television programme, transmit the feeling of going through the same daybreak experience as the members of the audience. Over the shoulders of presenters Diane Sawyer and Charles Gibson we see the morning rush-hour traffic moving along Times Square in the opening sequences of *Good Morning America*, the view over the sofa of *GMTV* is of a virtual London-like townscape. The opening scenes of *Huomenta Suomi* show the two presenters in a part of the studio that occupies the middle ground between a kitchen and a living room. Beginning with the titles, all shows in our sample say 'Good Morning' – as do many other breakfast magazines, for 'Good Morning' is the single most used name in breakfast television. The graphics and the tunes of the leaders represent sunshine, toasters, cereal, taking a shower, and the simple joys of having tea or coffee in the morning. They suggest a different world than the world of television news with its turning globes, the frenzy of a newsroom, the flashing pictures of major world events, its 'bongs' and ominous music.

In a very simple and inconspicuous way, the impression of a shared experience is sustained by the fact that, on most programmes we actually see night turn into day, as we do at home, by way of the street scenes through the studio windows, by updated images in traffic and weather

reports, etc. But often a sense of mutual sharing and caring is more actively pursued, as in this edition of *Huomenta Suomi*, where bad weather conditions help to establish a community between friends in the studio and friends back home (cf. Scannell, 1996: 177):

*Huomenta Suomi* (25 January 2001, 9.03 a.m.)

Co-hosts Lauri Karhuvaara and Liisa Riekkö discuss bad weather and driving conditions with weather presenter Pekka Pouta.

*Liisa Riekkö*: You managed to convince me, I am not going by car today, and (looking to camera) I hope you'll decide to follow my example.

*Lauri Karhuvaara* (to camera): We don't want to scare you, but be careful.

## Discussion

Breakfast television has consciously adopted the role of structuring household routines, in order to become part of them. It does so in an integrated whole of scheduling, styling and setting. Scheduling dailiness means serving the diverse needs of a diverse audience by offering a variety for everyone to pick from whenever needed, but organizing it in a way that combines fragmentation with continuity. Styling normality means creating a reassuring and relaxed atmosphere, needed at a stressful time of day, for example by de-mystifying television and television journalism. Setting familiarity provides a sense of belonging, nearness and relevance, reducing the distance between the viewer and the outside world by adopting the homey idiom and perspective of the audience.

Breakfast television contains hard talk and small talk, information and entertainment, coping elements and 'water cooler stuff', and it pays tribute to the conventions of all these different television genres. Each one is put in its proper frame: the news studio, the kitchen table, the sofa and the easy chairs in front of the fireplace. Still the majority of the content is framed within various household settings, used according to their functionality in our daily lives. Of course, Steve Friedman is right: nobody will believe that what we see is a real kitchen or a real living room,<sup>16</sup> still the message contained in this mimicking of the world of the morning viewer is of a kind of television that is not far away but close and relevant to us, that shares our feelings and experiences. It is a television that cares. Breakfast television's obsession with the audience is most clearly demonstrated in its suggestion that is is like we are. Even the male and female presenters' banter is reassuringly familiar.

Liveness, spontaneity, normality, the fact that things are allowed to go wrong, all serve the same purpose. Adaptation to the audience – and to the



state it is in – is the reason why the hosts should not be confrontational by being too different from the early morning viewer in their looks, their age, the way they dress and in their behaviour. The warmth, respect and genuine interest with which guests are treated on the programmes should also resemble the manner in which viewers would receive their own family, friends and neighbours. In a way, morning TV behaves very unlike television, by uncovering its artificiality, but on the other hand it exploits fully television's verisimilitude and capacity for being familiar and comforting in its normality. Breakfast television helps to give a recognizable and meaningful face to every morning. 'The meaningfulness shows up always in small ways and little things', Scannell (1996: 177) writes, and indeed, it is the little things such as warnings of bad driving conditions or finding the best Christmas decorations or the friendliness with which guests are welcomed that are the mark of breakfast television's essential everydayness.

## Notes

1. The term 'breakfast television' is commonly used in Europe; Americans speak of 'early morning news shows'.
2. Interview with Peter McHugh, GMTV director of programmes, 6 December 2001.
3. There are some semi-official broadcasting company reports (see Lantz, 1997; McGregor and Bristow, 1989) and non-academic studies (Davis, 1987; Wilson, 1984).
4. GMTV, 4 December 2001; *Good Morning America*, 10 November 2000; *Huomenta Suomi*, 25 January 2001. As our analysis concerned features of breakfast television as genre, there was no need to select editions from the same day, or to take the news agenda of the day into special consideration.
5. See Steve Friedman interviewed by Terence Smith (29 October 1999), *Morning News*. In web document <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/media/morningnews/friedman.html>, online 8 March 2001.
6. *Breakfast Time* was also innovative in a technological sense (see Fry, 1983), employing electronic systems to sustain a 24-hour production cycle and going live with electronic autotcue instead of printed scripts.
7. Steve Friedman in web document <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/media/morningnews/friedman.html>.
8. To drown out all other household activities that potential viewers may be engaged in, breakfast television has to make itself heard, which means that it has to behave like radio, and may be consumed as radio (cf. Rouhiainen, 1995).
9. Based on unpublished reports of participant observations for ASCoR breakfast TV research project at BBC *Breakfast News* (Emmy Dexel, 'Learn about the Real World at BBC's *Breakfast News*', London, 1999) and MTV3 *Huomenta Suomi* (Minna Ihatsu, 'Observations at *Huomenta Suomi*', Helsinki, 1999).
10. The main American early morning news shows will be broadcast first on the East Coast and later in other time zones. This means that in a way all items in these other time zones are repeats and that 'live' items are no longer live. By

captioning such items for instance as 'Live EST' (Eastern Standard Time), it is believed that this suggestion will not arise.

11. The constant movement from one set to another may be considered a substitute for action. The same applies to the (mostly) double-headed presentation of breakfast TV programmes. It adds energy to the programme, and energy is something TV producers are always looking for.

12. Patty Neger, producer live segments *Good Morning America* (interview 17 May 2000).

13. According to many producers, although for instance Peter McHugh, GMTV director of programmes, downplays their importance (interview 6 December 2001). Most breakfast magazines are produced by the news departments of broadcast organizations (although *Good Morning America* was at first made by the entertainment division of ABC), and a majority of the hosts come from (quite diverse) backgrounds in broadcast journalism, but the aspects mentioned above clearly require many other talents in breakfast TV hosts, such as an ability to improvise.

14. Interview 16 May 2000. Similarly, for example, Liisa Riekkö, presenter *Huomenta Suomi* (interview 25 October 2000), Carey Clark, deputy editor BBC *Breakfast News* (interview 16 December 1998).

15. About different modes of live broadcasting see Friedman (2002: 138–54).

16. Steve Friedman in web document <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/media/morningnews/friedman.html>.

## References

- Allan, S. (1998) 'News from NowHere: Televisual News Discourse and the Construction of Hegemony', pp. 105–41 in A. Bell and P. Garrett (eds) *Approaches to Media Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bourdon, J. (2000) 'Live Television Is Still Alive: On Television as an Unfilled Promise', *Media, Culture & Society* 22(5): 531–6.
- Corner, J. (1995) *Television Form and Public Address*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Cottle, S. (1993) 'Mediating the Environment: Modalities of TV News', pp. 107–33 in A. Hansen (ed.) *The Mass Media and Environmental Issues*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Cottle, S. (1995) 'The Production of News Formats: Determinants of Mediated Public Contestation', *Media, Culture & Society* 17(2): 275–91.
- Dahlgren, P. (1995) *Television and the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Democracy and the Media*. London: Sage.
- Davis, G. (1987) *The Today Show*. New York: Quill William Morrow.
- Dickinson, R., A. Murcott, J. Eldridge and S. Leader (2001) 'Breakfast, Time, and "Breakfast Time"', *Television and New Media* 2(3): 235–56.
- Ellis, J. (1982) *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Ellis, J. (2000) *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers.
- Feuer, J. (1983) 'The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology', pp. 12–22 in A. Kaplan (ed.) *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology*. Los Angeles: University Publications of America.
- Fiske, J. (1992) 'Popularity and the Politics of Information', pp. 45–63 in P. Dahlgren and C. Sparks (eds) *Journalism and Popular Culture*. London: Sage.

- Franklin, B. (1997) *Newszak and News Media*. London: Arnold.
- Friedman, J. (2002) 'Attraction to Distraction: Live Television and the Public Sphere', pp. 138–54 in J. Friedman (ed.) *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press.
- Fry, T. (1983) 'The Latest Technology for the Latest News: A BBC-designed Electronic Newsroom for Breakfast Time', *EBU Review* 24(4): 13–16.
- Hack, R. (1999) *Madness in the Morning: Life and Death in TV's Early Morning Ratings War*. Beverly Hills, CA: New Millennium Press.
- Hallin, D. (1994) *We Keep America on Top of the World: Television Journalism and the Public Sphere*. London: Routledge.
- Harrison, J. (2000) *Terrestrial TV News in Britain: The Culture of Production*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Hellman, H. (1996) 'The Formation of Television in Finland: A Case in Pragmatist Media Policy', pp. 91–109 in I. Bondebjerg and F. Bono (eds) *Television in Scandinavia: History, Politics and Aesthetics*. Luton: University of Luton Press.
- Jensen, K.B. (1986) *Making Sense of the News*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Kessler, J. (1992) *Inside Today: The Battle for the Morning*. New York: Villard Books.
- Lantz, J. (1997) *Analys av frukost-TV. Redaktionella inslag på SVT2 och TV 4 under fyra veckor hösten 1996*. N.p.: SVT Utveckling.
- Marshall, J. and A. Werndly (2002) *The Language of Television*. London: Routledge.
- McGregor, R. and R. Bristow (1989) 'Daily Life at Breakfast', pp. 85–94 in *Annual Review of BBC Broadcasting* 15.
- Moore, S. (1993) *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption*. London: Sage.
- Morse, M. (1986) 'The Television News, Personality and Credibility. Reflections on the News in Transition', pp. 55–79 in T. Modleski (ed.) *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Pogrebin, A. (1999) 'Their Fight for Your Morning', *Brill's Content* April: 108–15.
- Potter, J. (1990) *Independent Television in Britain: Companies and programmes, 1968–1980*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Rouhiainen, S. (1995) 'Television asema perheissä arki-aamuissa', unpublished MA thesis, Department of Communication, University of Helsinki.
- Scannell, P. (1996) *Radio, Television and Modern Life: A Phenomenological Approach*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sparks, C. (1992) 'Popular Journalism: Theories and Practice', pp. 24–44 in P. Dahlgren and C. Sparks (eds) *Journalism and Popular Culture*. London: Sage.
- Van Zoonen, L. (2002) *Media, cultuur en burgerschap*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.
- Wieten, J. (2000) 'Breakfast Television: Infotainers at Daybreak', pp. 175–97 in J. Wieten, G. Murdock and P. Dahlgren (eds) *Television across Europe: A Comparative Introduction*. London: Sage.
- Wieten, J. (2001) 'New Television, New Audiences: Early Morning Television in Europe', pp. 345–60 in K. Renckstorf, D. McQuail and N. Jankowski (eds) *Television News Research: Recent European Approaches and Findings*. Berlin: Quintessence Books.
- Wieten, J. (2002a) 'Ontbijttelevisie: Het einde van de vooruitgang in de televisiejournalistiek?', pp. 318–33 in J. Bardoel, C. Vos, F. van Vree and H. Wijffjes (eds) *Journalistieke Cultuur in Nederland*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

- Wieten J. (2002b) 'Mind the Gap: Convergence and Divergence in the Early Morning', unpublished paper presented at the RIPE@2002 Conference, Helsinki/Tampere 17–19 January.
- Wilson, E. (1984) 'All in the Family: Russell Grant on Breakfast Television', pp. 7–9 in L. Masterman (ed.) *Television Mythologies: Stars, Shows and Signs*. London: Comedia.
- Zettl, H. (1978) 'The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics', *Journal of the University Film Association* 30(2): 3–8.

**Jan Wieten** is associate professor at the Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR) and the department of communication of the Universiteit van Amsterdam and head of its News and Information section. His research interests include news genres, news production and media history. He edited, with Graham Murdock and Peter Dahlgren, *Television across Europe: A Comparative Introduction* (London: Sage, 2000).

**Address:** ASCoR/Department of Communication, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands. [email: j.wieten@uva.nl]

**Mervi Pantti** is research fellow at the Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR) in the University of Amsterdam. Her research interests include popular television genres, media policy, national identity, and emotions and media. Her publications include '*Kansallinen elokuva pelastettava*' – *Elokuvapoliittinen keskustelu kotimaisen elokuvan tukemisesta itsenäisyyden ajalla* ('National Cinema Must Be Saved' – The Debate on Subsidizing Domestic Film Production during the Period of Independence, 2000), *Kaikki muuttuu . . . Elokuvakulttuurin jälleerakentaminen Suomessa 1950-luvulta 1970 luvulle* (Rebuilding Film Culture in Finland from the 1950s to the 1970s, 1998].

**Address:** ASCoR/Department of Communication, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands. [email: mpantti@fmg.uva.nl]