

7

Time, Space and Catastrophe

7.1 The Live Coverage of Catastrophes

I suggested in Chapter 5 that there are two key characteristics of live television which impact upon the way in which the event is realized: its delivery of a range of different locales and moments, and its real-time multiple mediations of the world in which stuff is happening.

In Chapter 6 we examined some of the consequences of these characteristics for one particular kind of live occasion, election night, where a complex set of dialectical relationships was established between the centre of the event (the studio from which the live event was spoken) and its peripheries (the constituency counts and other locales).

One significant element in television's live performance of *Election 97* was the availability and distribution of personal media such as pagers and mobile phones. There were several references in the broadcast to the use of such media, as the following anecdote will demonstrate:

Next came Hartlepool, and another juicy moment in the interplay of screen with life. Here we watched Labour's campaign director joking with onlookers at his own count. Dimpleby observed: 'Peter Mandelson who apparently escaped a terrible car accident yesterday. He's the man who really constructed the whole of this campaign. He was responsible for every twist and turn of manipulation. He's known as the Prince of Darkness.' As we heard these words, we saw Mandelson reach into a pocket, pull out a pager and look down to read from the little screen. Dimpleby was watching. 'And there he is, looking at the pager with messages coming through – probably saying, "You're on BBC1. Smile." They control things so closely.' Mandelson did not smile.

(Cathcart, 1997: 15)

In such situations, local contexts of co-presence may be deluged with information from electronically mediated sources. Individuals in remote locations may be accessing other sites via fax or telephone, receiving pager messages sent by other spatially-dispersed individuals or watching the unfolding of remote events on a screen or a monitor; and they may, furthermore, be communicating at a distance with the studio for the further perusal of both present and non-present others who may, like themselves, be watching television, receiving messages and conferring in turn, all the while drawing this flood of information from disparate simultaneous sources into their understanding of the current state of play. It is this extensive availability of remote encounters with absent others which draws participants into the complex and dialectical communicative framework which I outlined in the previous chapter.

In this final chapter I will continue to explore the interactional possibilities which are opened up by the development and spatial distribution of electronic forms of communication. My focus here, as in other chapters, will be on the phenomenology of the live television event; and I will be arguing here for a distinct phenomenological shift in the nature of the event.

My concern in this chapter will be those live events which have been referred to elsewhere as 'news events' (Dayan and Katz, 2003), 'happenings' (Scannell, 1999), 'crises' (Doane, 1990; Nimmo and Combs, 1985) or 'catastrophes' (Doane, 1990). Such events are of particular interest for a consideration of live television because of the way in which they erupt spontaneously, taking over the schedules. All live television events, as I argued in Chapter 4, are *atelic*, inasmuch as they come into being in the moment of transmission and reception. Classic media events, however, generally afford television a considerable period of time in which to 'forestructure' the occasion (Scannell, 1999: 29), and as a consequence broadcasters are able to demonstrate, at their best, a fairly flawless mastery of the occasion, with smooth transitions from one shot to the next and an integral and unobtrusive voiceover commentary which serves both to contextualize the image and to anticipate what will come next. The case is otherwise with the breaking news story or catastrophe. Flung into the middle of a situation which may or may not be ongoing, may or may not be about to develop in unanticipated directions, the broadcaster must scramble to provide coverage of the situation and to construct a narrative whose substance must be shaped in the real time of transmission and reception. In such a situation, the ability to communicate rapidly and in real time with the peripheries of the event is crucial if the broadcaster is to establish and frame what is going on.

I will argue in this chapter that the increasingly complex connectivity of the world has had an extraordinarily far-reaching impact upon the phenomenology of live disaster coverage. I will suggest, furthermore, that we can trace this impact, in part at least, to the growing mobility of electronic forms of communication. In what follows, I will examine this question via a consideration of the communicative circuits which arise at the moment of breaking news.

7.2 The Catastrophic Event: JFK and 9/11

In the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, the event was compared – in the suddenness with which it burst upon the world, in its capacity to hold huge television audiences enthralled for hours or days at a time, in the demands which it made upon broadcasters – to another, earlier event. As the NBC anchor Tom Brokaw put it: 'It was very much like the Kennedy assassination' (Gilbert et al., 2002: 171). A close inspection of the live television coverage in 2001 and 1963, however, reveals significant differences between these two events.

We can start to consider these differences via an examination of the live talk produced by the anchors on each occasion, with particular reference to the question of *evidentiality* (Anderson, 1986; Bybee, 1985; Chafe, 1986; Chung and

Timberlake, 1985; Willett, 1988), the way in which speakers indicate the source for their statements. Willett (1988: 57) distinguishes *direct evidence* (garnered from an individual's own perceptual access to an event) from *indirect evidence* (which must be either inferred from a situation or gleaned second- or third-hand from the reports of others). This will prove to be a useful distinction in examining these two events. A brief consideration, for example, of the live US coverage on NBC in the early hours after Kennedy's assassination makes it clear that the anchors' source for the information which they are relaying to the audience is entirely *indirect*, inasmuch as it is based on the reports of others:

The report is that the President is in very critical condition.

The President is seriously wounded. This information comes from Senator Ralph Yarborough.

A policeman has told Bob that he heard, the policeman heard that it was a high-powered rifle.

There is this from Dallas ... President Kennedy has been given blood transfusions.

The word still is that the President is in very serious condition, the reports say he is in critical condition.

Just a moment Bob I'm going to interrupt for a bulletin that the Associated Press has moved from Dallas.

So that is the story. The President of the United States is dead. The new President of the United States is Lyndon Johnson ... President Kennedy, we are now informed, was shot in the right temple. It was a simple matter of a bullet right through the head, said Doctor George Berkeley, the White House medical officer.

The following two utterances provide more detailed examples. The first disclosure of Kennedy's death is couched in terms which repeatedly remind the audience of the sources of the anchors' second- and third-hand knowledge (the Associated Press; two priests at the Dallas Memorial Hospital), and reiterate the epistemological status of the information (unconfirmed, partial) and its status as hearsay. The second statement, from a Dallas-based NBC affiliate some minutes later, operates in a similar vein.

Here is a flash from the Associated Press dateline Dallas. Two priests who were with President Kennedy say he is dead of bullet wounds. There is no further confirmation but this is what we have on a flash basis from the Associated Press. Two priests in Dallas who were with President Kennedy say he is dead of bullet wounds. There is no further confirmation. This is the only word we have indicating that the President may in fact have lost his life. It is just moved on the Associated Press wires from Dallas. The two priests were called to the hospital to administer the last rites of the Roman Catholic church and it is from them we get the word that the President has died, that the bullet wound inflicted on him as he rode in the motorcade through downtown Dallas have been fatal. We would remind you there is no official confirmation of this from any source as yet.

Substantiating this but not confirming it is a report about five minutes ago by the Dallas police department to all of its officers that the President had died. Some three five minutes later the Associated Press flashed that two priests at the hospital say the President is dead.

The same kinds of 'quotative' (Chung and Timberlake, 1985) or 'hearsay' (Chafe, 1986: 268) evidentials turn up in the live 9/11 coverage, as these extracts from NBC in 2001 will demonstrate:

Just to recap if you're just joining us you're looking at dramatic pictures of New York's World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan, where a short time ago we are told that a plane crashed into the upper floors of the westernmost tower.

Right now we're getting information, Al, that it was a small commuter plane.

Just a few minutes ago we're told that a plane, some reports are that it was a small commuter plane ...

It's a 737, we're now being told.

Such utterances are in the minority in 2001, however, particularly in the early stages of the event when authoritative comments from external sources were thin on the ground. What we find instead is comment after comment where the warranty for the speakers' assertions is provided not on the basis of reports from others but rather via their own (mediated) view of what is transpiring:

There was another one we just saw we just saw another one we just saw another one apparently go another plane just flew into the second tower ... we just saw on live television as a second plane flew into the second tower of the World Trade Center.

(Fox News)

We just saw a plane circling the building a second ago on the shot right before that.

(NBC)

We have another view now of that plane slamming into the second building, look at it, it's coming in from the side, coming low, hitting the building about in the middle. Folks, you see the pictures, it looks like Hollywood but this is real.

(CNN)

We're gonna look for that tape one more time, we're gonna re-rack the tape here and see if we can't see um a plane, yeah, we see it right now, we see a plane right now coming in and impacting on what would appear to be the north side of that tower.

(CBS)

What I wanna do is take a look at that airplane in slow motion, it looks like a jet aircraft.

(MSNBC)

There's there is a further there is a further dramatic explosion we're just witnessing there we saw a plane a small plane passing by and there seems to be a further explosion.

(BBC News 24)

How might we account for this difference between the two events, which we might characterize as an overall shift from indirect to direct sources of evidence? We might, first of all, attribute it to the different moments at which television

began its coverage. In the case of 9/11, the live transmissions had already commenced by the time the second tower was attacked, and the anchors were therefore in a position to comment on what they could see transpiring in real time on the studio monitors. The shooting of Kennedy, by contrast, was a telic event which had already concluded by the time the live breaking news broadcasts went on air, and there was therefore no possibility of viewing or commenting on it live.

This explanation, however, will not take us very far. Although the shooting itself had already happened in 1963 by the time NBC and the other broadcasters went on air, it is clear from the extracts above that the ramifications of the event – was Kennedy alive or dead? Who had shot him? – were still in the process of making themselves known. Were such an incident to occur now, live footage from the scene – the hospital, Dealey Plaza, the relevant police precincts – would clearly be on the screen, even if this could only serve as a strictly uninformative backdrop to the anchor's voiceover, as in this extract from the BBC's live coverage of the (similarly telic) de Menezes shooting in 2005:

So what is happening now? We we can see this this street in front of the station, I presume it's in front of the station, we can see a bus that's parked there, no traffic but people, some people on the pavement.

(BBC News 24)

A more useful explanation can be offered by considering the technology which television had at its disposal in 1963. We can note, first of all, that there were no live cameras in Dealey Plaza when the President was shot; and in the absence of live cameras, there would be an inevitable and lengthy delay before shooting could commence. Live television broadcasting, in 1963, required considerable planning. Coaxial cable had to be laid in advance, or microwave relays set up; television cameras, furthermore, required a couple of hours to warm up sufficiently to operate.¹ Affiliates of two of the networks – ABC and CBS – had set up live shots at the Dallas Trade Mart, where the President had been due to have lunch, and so those networks were able to deliver live coverage from there; but there could be no live transmission either from Dealey Plaza or from the Dallas Memorial Hospital where he was taken. There were no live radio commentators in Dealey Plaza either, although an ostensibly live broadcast ('We can't see who has been hit if anybody's been hit, but apparently something is wrong here, something is terribly wrong') was in circulation for many years afterwards, produced by a Dallas KBOX commentator after the event as a re-creation of the event, complete with the sounds of sirens and gunfire. It would be several hours before film, still wet from developing, began to appear on television screens, a somewhat macabre combination of material shot earlier in the day of an apparently relaxed and smiling Kennedy in Fort Worth joking to the cameras about the popularity of his wife, and raw footage of members of the public milling around Dealey Plaza or keeping vigil outside the hospital.

¹<http://www.museum.tv/archives/ctv/K/htmlK/kennedyjf/kennedyjf.htm> (accessed 10 July 2005).

Only one film of the assassination was to come the networks' way, and they declined to purchase it. A Dallas clothing manufacturer called Abraham Zapruder had captured the assassination of the President on his super 8 camera and sold the footage to *Life Magazine*. NBC and ABC, offered the film some days after the event, viewed it and decided not to use it, on the grounds that it was 'too dramatic' and not 'the thing for home television'. 'The inside of a man's brain being outside', as one NBC producer put it, was too awful to broadcast (Love, 1965: 83–84). The film would not appear on American television until 1975.

This absence of live footage led to a radically different form of coverage when compared to more recent live breaking news broadcasts. Once again we can consider the NBC broadcast here. To examine the broadcast now is to watch the three anchors – Frank McGee, Chet Huntley and Bill Ryan – sitting behind a desk facing the camera with a blank wall behind them, addressing the audience at home, turning to talk with one another, speaking into a telephone, listening to messages on earpieces or picking up pieces of paper which are placed on the desk in front of them by individuals off-screen. Occasionally one of them will prop up on the desk a hastily developed photograph of a hale and hearty Kennedy snapped earlier in the day, and attempt to orient it so that the image can be picked up by the camera. Throughout these activities, these anchors are relaying information as it comes in: from the wire services, whose periodic updates are read out on air as soon as they are placed in front of them or received via their earpieces, and from the NBC correspondent Bob McNeill, who was with the presidential motorcade in Dallas and who has gone on to the Dallas Memorial Hospital. McNeill is phoning in regular reports which cannot be heard on air for most of the early stages of the broadcast and which must therefore be repeated verbatim by Frank McGee, who is talking to him on the telephone. At intervals a hand will enter the frame and attempt to set up a device on the desk which will permit McNeill's voice to be heard live on air. As this device functions only intermittently, McGee must constantly break off either to allow McNeill to be heard or to start repeating his words verbatim when it becomes clear that the device isn't working.

It is hardly surprising, given this set of circumstances, that the discourse produced in the studio in 1963 should be almost entirely metadiscursive: it is talk about talk, as the extracts above have demonstrated, because talk – the words of others – is by and large all that the broadcaster has at its disposal. 9/11 could not be more different in this respect. As we saw in Chapter 3, all of the major American networks and cable news channels were airing live footage from New York within five minutes of the first plane hitting the North Tower of the World Trade Center. By the time this tower collapsed just before 10.30 a.m. Eastern Time, all of the channels had agreed to pool footage (Gilbert et al., 2002: 125), and this footage was also on offer in the form of live feeds to affiliate stations and other broadcasters worldwide. Over the course of several hours, around the globe, live images of the World Trade Center and re-racked footage of key moments of the day's events dominated television screens.

To watch the early stages of the live coverage of 9/11 is to become aware of one important consequence of this superabundance of raw footage: a preoccupation

with the moment of witnessing. Several of the broadcasters – NBC, for instance, and CNN – positioned key personnel on rooftops, where they could serve simultaneously as anchors and eyewitnesses. This sense of direct witness emerges as a powerful element in their commentary. Here, for example, is Aaron Brown from CNN, live on a rooftop as the North Tower collapses:

There has just been a huge explosion we can see uh a billowing smoke rising and I can't I'll tell you that I can't see that second tower but y there was a cascade of sparks and fire and now there's it looks almost like a mushroom cloud explosion this huge billowing smoke in the second tower this was the second of the two towers hit and I you know I cannot see behind that smoke obviously...

In this extract the quotative forms which occurred so regularly in the live 1963 coverage ('the reports say ...'; 'we are informed ...') have given way entirely to 'experiential' (Chung and Timberlake, 1985) or 'attested' (Willett, 1988) evidentials ('we can see'; 'it looks'), which make it clear that the speaker's comments are warranted by his own direct experience of the world. Nor are the anchors – whether they are in the studio watching what is happening on their monitors, or out on the rooftop seeing for themselves – the only individuals who are implicated in this moment of witnessing. The experience – in a mediated form – is also repeatedly offered to the remote audience, who are exhorted again and again to look and see for themselves:

We have some remarkable pictures coming in from New York which we can go to now and they show us that one of the world's tallest buildings right in the heart of the business district of Manhattan, the World Trade Center, appears to be on fire. As you can see, something has clearly happened towards the top of the building and these are very dramatic live pictures coming into the BBC right now.

(BBC News 24)

This just in you are looking at obviously a very disturbing live shot there that is the World Trade Center and we have unconfirmed reports this morning that a plane has crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center.

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(CNN)

Just to recap if you're just joining us you're looking at dramatic pictures of New York's World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan, where a short time ago we are told that a plane crashed into the upper floors of the westernmost tower. You can see a gaping hole, that is on the north side of the building, and you can see residual damage on the west side of the building, and obviously fires are burning right right now in the World Trade Center.

(NBC)

How might we think about the phenomenology of these events, about the way in which they are mediated and structured by television so as to offer a particular kind of experience to the audience? The live broadcasts in 2001 offer a number of positions from which the event can be encountered: the direct access to the event which is the domain of broadcast personnel on rooftops overlooking Lower Manhattan; the mediated encounter which is on offer not only to the anchors in the studios but also to the audience at home, who are offered the image as a

token of veridicality and invited to position themselves as witnesses to the event in the moment of its unfolding. None of these positions were available in 1963. As we have seen, certain essential elements of the event – the shooting itself, the rapid drive to the hospital – had already transpired by the time television arrived to make sense of them, whilst footage of the others – what was happening at the hospital, in Washington, elsewhere in Dallas – was not accessible live on the air. As a result, the broadcast was unable to offer the audience an encounter with the ‘real’ of the event; it could not provide the opportunity to witness. What it could do, certainly, was to permit the audience to ‘be there’ at the moment when the news got out, to witness the moment when the death of the President was announced; but this was the moment when the town crier first reveals the catastrophic, and not the moment of the catastrophe itself as one would encounter it if one were *there*.

This view of the difference between these events opens up an important question, which has to do with the relationship between witnessing and mediation. To watch an event on television is, as I said in Chapter 1, to engage with a representation, inasmuch as we cannot remotely encounter the real. How, then, can this kind of experience be described as a moment of witnessing? For some writers this appears relatively unproblematic. Ellis’s view, for instance, that the twentieth century was the ‘century of witness’ (2000: 9) makes it clear that he regards mediated encounters with events-at-a-distance as sufficient. As he puts it,

a profound shift has taken place in the way we perceive the world that exists beyond our immediate experience ... The acceleration of communications has brought us word of so many events, so many peoples, so many places. We live in an era of information, and photography, film and television have brought us visual evidence. Their quasi-physical documentation of specific moments in specific places has brought us face to face with the great events, the banal happenings, the horrors and the incidental cruelties of our time.

(Ellis, 2000: 9)

Not all writers, however, are prepared to grant remote observers the full set of rights and privileges associated with an immediate encounter with the event. Peters, for example, draws a distinction between the licence to attest to the authenticity of the event which is bestowed upon an individual who was *there*, and what he regards as the second-hand relation to the situation which is held by those who are present at a distance (Peters, 2001: 717). While the latter can claim the status of witnesses who at least are present in time if not in space, they cannot, according to Peters, stand as witnesses to history, precisely because they lack ‘privileged (raw, authentic) proximity to facts’ (2001: 709). To view an event live, nevertheless, confers upon the individual some kind of a warranty which is altogether denied to those who encounter the event at a later date. Recording, for Peters, is ‘the profane zone in which the attitude of witnessing is hardest to sustain’ (2001: 720).

As our interest here lies with the phenomenology of the event, however, we should not allow ourselves to be overly concerned with this question. As Peters puts it, during media events ‘the borrowed eyes and ears of the media

become, however tentatively or dangerously, one's own' (2001: 717). The crucial distinction between the Kennedy coverage and that of 9/11 is that the latter is able to *position* the audience as witnesses to the catastrophic, whether or not this is a status that can be fully warranted by the spatio-temporal characteristics of the situation. Live television, in 2001, operates as an interface, explicitly offering the audience a mediated encounter with the place of the event. In 1963, by contrast, television is essentially a conduit for reports which are being garnered elsewhere and which are then communicated verbally – via the phone, via the wires – to the studio for instantaneous relay to the remote audience. Its mode of dealing with the unexpected is a species of semaphore, receiving and transmitting information as part of a chain of messages whose end point is the viewer at home, with a minimum of interpretative activity along the way.

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7.3 Witnessing the Event

In the previous chapter I discussed the spatial intricacy of the live event, the innumerable elsewheres which can be drawn into a dynamic and dialectical relationship with each other in the real time of transmission and reception. Election night serves as an excellent example of the way in which the classic media event, with its long forestructuring period in which to rehearse and refine the substance of the programme, is able to anticipate and engineer felicitous patterns of connectivity between one place and another through the mediation of the studio. We can now continue this investigation of space, place and the live event by considering the manner in which live breaking news works to recruit and integrate the multiplicity of locales which are deemed to be of relevance to the event. As before, we shall see a distinct difference in the management of space and place as we consider more recent events against the backdrop of the 1963 broadcasts. Two related factors will be of particular interest to this discussion: the rise of the 'citizen reporter', and the proliferation of eyewitness accounts in live breaking news.

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We can note first of all, with reference to more recent live news stories, both the speed at which details of the event now become known and the transformation in the nature of the sources for the story. In the immediate aftermath of the attack on the London transport system on 7 July 2005, for example, the news broke very fast. Within nine minutes of the first three bombs exploding an image had appeared on a mobile blogger site on the internet (Reeves, 2005: 17). Reuters was able to put out its first report at 9.11 a.m., some 20 minutes after the attacks, a 50-word piece simply noting that there had been a "'bang", possibly power related' and that Liverpool Street station had been closed. Eighteen minutes later they put out a second piece stating that a number of stations had been closed. By this point the Press Association had also put out its first story, and the news had begun to air on the rolling news channels in the UK (Fixter, 2005: 18).

Much of the information acquired and used by the media in the early hours came from people who had been on the scene. Some of these individuals worked for the media or for the press agencies. One Sky News producer, for instance,

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had been evacuated from Kings Cross and as a result saw the bus explosion in Tavistock Square at 9.47; his report went out live on Sky News three minutes later, swiftly moving the focus of the breaking news story from power surge to deliberate attack (Pike, 2005: 18). Other stories came about as a consequence of media personnel hearing the news on the radio on their way to work. A BBC editor heard on his car radio less than ten minutes after the first explosions that there were disruptions on London Underground; he began reporting to Radio Five Live and BBC News 24 on his mobile phone within minutes, and was speaking live on air as he heard the 'thunderous boom' of the bus explosion at Tavistock Square from a street a few hundred yards away (Pike, 2005: 18).

Many of the early sources, however, were members of the public who had been caught up in the explosions. Again and again it was individuals involved in the morning's events who alerted the media and supplied information and images of the attacks. The London *Evening Standard*, whose first edition of the day at 9.45 a.m. carried the headline 'Bombs on tubes kill commuters', had been alerted to the story in the first instance by a phone call from a contact who was being evacuated from Liverpool Street, and who was running away from the scene of the explosion as he spoke on the phone (Lagan, 2005: 17). The image on the moblogger site, a photo of 'people milling about in front of a train station, with a police car and ambulance in the background', came directly from the mobile phone of a site user and was accompanied by a text message alerting other users to a 'big bang at Liverpool Street' (Reeves, 2005: 17). Another mobile phone image, showing the inside of a tube carriage after one of the explosions, was picked up and prominently displayed by the *Daily Mail* and other newspapers (Reeves, 2005: 17).

Television newsrooms began to receive such pictures and video clips within minutes of the explosions. ITN received over a dozen mobile phone video clips on the first day (Day, 2005: 2). The BBC received 50 images from members of the public by the end of the first hour, and was able to air its first mobile phone sequence of the attacks within 20 minutes of receiving it; its main evening news at 10.00 p.m. featured two mobile phone video clips sent in by members of the public (Day, 2005: 2). Sky News, similarly, aired a mobile phone sequence of one of the bombed tube sites at 1.00 p.m., some 20 minutes after receiving it (Day, 2005: 2).

This flood of eyewitness material was hailed after the event as ushering in a new age of news coverage, marked by the arrival of the 'citizen reporter' (Day, 2005: 2). But the attacks of 7 July were by no means the first occasion on which such 'user-generated material'² had had a substantial impact on the reporting of a disaster. In 2004, both the floods in Boscastle in Cornwall and the Asian Tsunami had given rise to a mass of material sent in by members of the public.³ The live coverage of the attacks on New York in September 2001 was similarly attended by a rapid proliferation of images and information generated by individuals on the ground.

²Helen Boaden, Director of News, BBC, interviewed in Day (2005).

³See note 2.

Gilbert et al.'s (2002) account of the events of 9/11 from the perspective of broadcast journalists provides an extraordinary picture of the way in which the news was gathered in the first hours after it began to break. As with 7/7, much of the information in the early part of the day came from people who were on the scene. Some of these, again, were individuals who worked in television news, who witnessed one or the other of the impacts from the windows of an apartment or an office, or on the ground nearby, or from a news helicopter already in the skies over New York. Others were members of the public who were caught up in the event. One news correspondent mentions seeing 'throng[s] of people' on the sidewalks talking on their mobile phones, snapping pictures, listening to radios or simply staring at the catastrophe unfolding in front of them (Gilbert et al., 2002: 56).

As with 7/7, many of the images which were broadcast in the early stages of the disaster came directly or indirectly from members of the public (Carey, 2002: 73). Some were out on the streets with video cameras, and either were hired on the spot to film for the day (Gilbert et al., 2002: 26, 37), were paid hard cash to sell their equipment to the professionals who encountered them (2002: 46) or simply handed them over gratis (2002: 157). Others gave or sold footage to the broadcasters. One tape in particular was hawked around the broadcasters by a photo agency and finally sold to the highest bidder, CNN, after the agency claimed that another network was willing to pay \$10,000 for it (Gilbert et al., 2002: 215). The tape, shot by two French documentary makers who were on the streets of New York that morning, had captured the moment when the first plane hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center, before the live television coverage began. Further images and video clips appeared on the internet on community-news sites or peer-to-peer networks such as Morpheus, the latter exhorting its users to 'be the media' by helping to ensure that the news would be available to its users (Hu, 2001, cited in Allan, 2002: 127).

The high visibility of events at the World Trade Center also ensured that there was no shortage of eyewitnesses. The first eyewitness accounts aired extraordinarily quickly. On NBC, the first telephone interview with an eyewitness downtown, conducted in voiceover between the witness and an anchor, aired only 15 seconds into the breaking news coverage; a further five eyewitness accounts went out live over the next 15 minutes. A similar picture emerges on most of the other channels. CBS interviewed five eyewitnesses in the first 20 minutes, the first one airing just 30 seconds after coverage commenced; CNN broadcast a string of eyewitness reports in the first 20 minutes, most of them through affiliate stations in New York.

The early minutes of the breaking news coverage of September 11 are full of exhortations to bear witness, as these extracts from NBC will demonstrate:

Can you please tell me what you saw?

Can you tell us a little bit more about what you heard when you heard this explosion, describe it for us.

So Elliot, what can you see right now from your perspective?

Did you see, George, the second plane that just flew into the sec the other trade tower?

Dan, tell me about people on the ground, are you at a vantage point where you can see what's happening on the ground?

These requests to bear witness are, in turn, readily responded to in the required form by the individuals interviewed:

I just heard another very loud bang and a very large plane that might have been a DC9 or a 747 flew past my window and I think it may have hit the Trade Center.

(NBC)

I just saw a plane go into the building.

(CBS)

I just witnessed a plane that appeared to be cruising in slightly lower than normal altitude and it appeared to have crashed into I don't know which tower it is but it hit directly in the middle.

(CNN)

7.4 Covering the World: The de Menezes Story

The live broadcasts on 9/11 are by no means unique in their rapid conjuration of eyewitness accounts. An examination of the live coverage on BBC News 24 in the immediate aftermath of the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes on 22 July 2005 will make clear the extent to which live breaking news has become dependent, in the early stages of its coverage, on testimony from members of the public concerning what they saw and heard as bystanders to history.

Menezes was shot by police officers on a train standing in Stockwell underground station, having been followed from a building in Tulse Hill, South London, which was under surveillance following a wave of attempted attacks in London the day before. Hard information was in short supply in the immediate aftermath of the shooting: Menezes was shot at around 10 a.m., and it would not be until around 10.45 a.m. that Scotland Yard would issue a bare statement confirming the situation. BBC News 24 filled the intervening time by calling upon witness after witness to provide their version of events. As on 11 September, individuals seem more than happy to comply:

I saw I I saw an Asian guy he he looked Pakistani ... he he ran onto the train he was hotly pursued by three what I I I just presumed them to be three plain clothes police officers one of them was wielding a black handgun ... I saw the gun being fired five times into into the guy.

I was sitting on the uh uh tube train, it hadn't pulled out of the station at this time but the doors were still open. I heard um a lot of shouting, get down, get out. I looked to my right, I saw a chap run onto the onto the train um Asian guy um he ran onto the train sort of [—] he was running so fast he half sort of tripped but he was being pursued by three guys, one had a black handgun in his hand, left hand, uh as he sort of went down two of them sort of dropped onto him to hold him down and the other one

fired the gun, I heard five shots ... I was maybe four or five yards along where this accident happened, I I watched it.

It seems clear that eyewitness testimony is central to the BBC's attempts to construct a narrative of the shooting in this case. The anchors, for instance, repeatedly refer to the eyewitness statements in their periodic summation of the breaking news:

Now let's just remind you of what's been happening at Stockwell underground station over the past now a very dramatic development. According to eyewitnesses uh a man leapt the security barriers, ran into the station onto the platform of the Northern Line, jumped onto the train hotly pursued by plain clothes officers who fired five shots into him at close range. Mark Whitby uh the man who gave us that account uh was of course on the train five seats away he said from all of this and he described the scene to News 24.

Now we've got um uh of course eyewitness accounts from every single direction this morning from Stockwell, we've had people on the platform we've had people on the train, we've had people outside the station, um let's have a look into what some of those eyewitnesses have been seeing and hearing this morning.

So just to bring you more on that, we've had a lot of eyewitness accounts this morning, piecing together what took place after 10 o'clock at uh Stockwell. Um one eyewitness Steven Jones was driving past Stockwell tube station when the incident occurred and he joins me now on the line ... what did you see?

As this last example demonstrates, the Menezes coverage exhibits precisely the same exhortations to testify as the 9/11 material. Just as the American broadcasters on 9/11 would enquire of their eyewitnesses as to what they had seen and heard, so the BBC anchors in July 2005 called upon their interviewees to deliver an account of their experiences:

Tell us what you saw, Graham.

Did you see the smoking bag, or just the smoking?

So you saw a smoking carriage, other people said they saw the smoke coming from a bag, but you didn't see anybody acting suspiciously.

You talked about a strong smell, what kind of smell?

At first glance, this reliance on eyewitness accounts in the early stages of the Menezes story seems hardly surprising. The shooting, as I have said, was a telic event which had already come to pass by the time the rolling news channels commenced their live coverage. It was therefore too late to send cameras to the scene at Stockwell to provide live images of unfolding events other than the routine goings-on outside the underground station. Given these circumstances, the testimony of individuals who were *there* was the closest that television could come to providing its audience with an encounter with the event. As with the 1963 broadcasts, however, the telicity of the event will not entirely suffice as an explanation. The use of multiple eyewitnesses in the early stages of the 9/11 coverage, when the live broadcast was still clearly *in medias res*, would suggest that the phenomenon has not simply to do with the need to find individuals to attest to a situation which television cannot directly deliver. If we examine the

1963 assassination, furthermore, we will find that there is a marked absence of eyewitness testimony in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, despite the telicity of the event.

Given the abundance of direct eyewitnesses to the shooting of the President in 1963, the live broadcasts which followed might seem like exactly the kind of situation in which television might turn to live testimony to furnish an account of what had transpired. The CBS broadcast, however, has no eyewitness statements in the early hours of its live coverage. Over a similar period of time the NBC broadcast has just one, recorded on tape in an interview format by their local affiliate WBAP-TV Fort Worth Dallas and played on air during one of their live handovers to the station. This sole interviewee apart, NBC have at their disposal only their own correspondent, Bob McNeill, who was part of the presidential motorcade. McNeill, in other words, stands in the same relation to events as the BBC editor who hears the bus explosion on 7 July 2005, or the various members of the media who are within sight or hearing of the plane impacts on 11 September 2001: he is a direct witness to events. In McNeill's case, however, the NBC anchors swiftly deflect his attempts to provide a narrative of personal experience, steering him back towards what can be known and verified. Here, for example, is Frank McGee in the studio, alternately relaying McNeill's live down-the-line telephone contribution and interrogating him for further information:

Bob informs me that he was in the motorcade. He says he was able to hear the shots. They stopped and as the shots rang out people lining the streets screamed and lay down on the sidewalk and in the street ... Bob, have you any information on how many times or where the President was shot? Bob does not know how many times or where the President was struck. All he knows is the President was seriously wounded and that is the latest information that they have.

Other interactions with McNeill similarly focus on what can be established through official sources rather than on what can be attested through a direct encounter with the event:

Can you take it from the top, Bob, and tell us everything that you know if you would, please, in chronological order.

Bob is telling me that the latest he knows at the moment is that the President's condition is serious and uncertain.

How might we make sense of this transformation in the relationship between the broadcaster and the people on the ground? We can note, to start with, that it is indicative of a further shift from a more indirect to a more direct form of sourcing in live breaking news stories. The analysis in this chapter of more recent catastrophe coverage has revealed not only the prevalence of experiential or attested evidentiality ('I can see ...') on the part of the anchors, but also a predilection for first-hand narratives which take as their point of departure what can be seen and heard by a co-present individual. The discussions of the 1963 material, by contrast, demonstrate both a dependence on indirect sources of evidence and a distinct disinclination to follow up on the testimony provided by direct eyewitnesses.

What kinds of explanation might we offer for this proliferation of user-generated material and eyewitness accounts in live major breaking news stories? Once again, part of the explanation must lie with the affordances of new forms of electronic media. Just as technological change is implicated in the shift from quotative to experiential evidentiality, so it has a clear role to play in the increasing availability of direct testimony. In 1963, in the absence of mobile telephony, reporters and correspondents on the scene were unable to communicate in real time with their organizations unless they could lay their hands on a landline phone or a radiophone. That these were in short supply can be demonstrated by the following anecdote, which concerns the battle in the press pool car, six cars behind the presidential limousine, for control of the means of remote real-time communication:

As the forward part of the motorcade turned left in Dealey Plaza ... a sudden 'bam' sounded somewhere close by ... Smith counted two more cracks ... Where the bullets came from and where they went he did not know. He simply grabbed the radiophone, called the UPI Dallas bureau, and at 12:34 P.M. central standard time dictated, 'Three shots were fired at President Kennedy's motorcade today in downtown Dallas'. Throughout the world the bulletin clacked on UPI printers two minutes before the blood-spattered limousine reached Parkland Memorial Hospital. Despite rage and pummeling by Bell, his competitor from the Associated Press, Smith held the phone almost all the way to hospital. Clark of ABC, pooling for the networks, had no way to get his hands on it. It would be years before network reporters who covered the White House would be equipped with cellular phones or walkie-talkies.

(Donovan and Scherer, 1992: 59)

Nor is it only the lines of communication between media personnel and their institutions which are affected by the presence or absence of mobile technology. The rise of the citizen reporter – and the related deluge of user-generated material which has become increasingly definitional in recent breaking news coverage – is also chiefly dependent upon the large-scale availability of personal media and/or mobile transmission units. On 9/11, for instance, CNN received around two dozen amateur tapes, mostly as a consequence of people approaching their transmission trucks on the streets (Gilbert et al., 2002: 214). In 1963, by contrast, NBC did not have a mobile unit at their disposal until the morning after the assassination, as the engine of their affiliate's truck had burned out in the course of the precipitous drive to Parkland Memorial Hospital after the shooting, and arrangements had to be made to tow it around by a wrecking truck (Pettit, 1965: 63). The rapid delivery of live eyewitness accounts from the place of the event is similarly dependent upon the distribution of personal media and/or the machinery of satellite and microwave transmission. All in all, the technology which would permit the broadcasters in 2001 and 2005 to readily access people on the ground in the real time of the broadcast was either scarce or non-existent in 1963.

Such an explanation by itself, of course, will not serve to account for the way in which eyewitness testimony was marginalized by the broadcaster in 1963. NBC, as I have demonstrated, had a live link with an eyewitness in the form of their correspondent, Bob McNeill, but chose to steer him away from direct testimony and to encourage him to focus on what he had been able to glean from official

sources; it also had access, via its affiliate station, to a recorded audio interview with a direct eyewitness, but it is noticeable that this interview, once played live on air, is not mentioned in the reporting that immediately follows. Other factors clearly have a role to play here in opening up the space of the eyewitness account in more recent live catastrophe coverage. We should acknowledge, *inter alia*, the effects of a changing media landscape (Anderson, 2004; Barkin, 2003; Ehrlich, 1997; Hamilton, 2004; Lewis et al., 2005a), in which live broadcast news providers find themselves in competition with both other channels and other media such as the internet and mobile telephony, with the consequence that there is a rush to air in which individuals on the ground become an invaluable resource in filling empty airtime, in propelling the story forward and in breaking the news fast; and we should note, too, a corresponding shift from the old-school journalism of verification towards a 'journalism of assertion', which is 'less interested in substantiating whether something is true and more interested in getting it into the public discussion' (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999: 8), and which can therefore warrant the use of (strictly unverifiable) personal testimony as both a source and a resource. The rise of participatory journalism can be related, furthermore, to the growth of broadcast genres such as the audience participation programme and the reality show, which are similarly centred around the delivery of 'ordinary' or 'real' people, and also to the increasing use of vox pops in news and media event broadcasting, all of which contribute to a rhetoric of authenticity across a number of non-fiction formats (Holmes, 2004; Montgomery, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2001).

As Lewis et al. (2005b: 19) note, however, eyewitness accounts can strictly be distinguished from vox pops on the grounds that the latter involve citizens 'cast simply as citizens' (2005b: 17), individuals whose opinions are sought on the grounds that they are held to be representative of some wider constituency of the ordinary. Eyewitnesses, by contrast, stand in a privileged relationship to the event: they are extraordinary rather than ordinary, momentarily rendered unique by their proximity to history, by the simple accident of *being there*. This leads us in turn to a further factor in the growth of eyewitness accounts in live breaking news coverage: a shift over recent decades to a model of television news which is increasingly based on *presence*, on a 'fetishizing' of liveness (Winston, 2002: 15) in which immediacy becomes a significant rhetorical device. As Lewis et al. (2005a: 466) put it:

[I]f the 'scoop' was once journalism's holy grail, the move to a 24-hour news culture has replaced it with a desire for immediacy. This is an interesting and – some might say, postmodern – turn. The classic 'scoop' is driven by investigation, the result of delving and probing. The integrity of the 'scoop' depends upon substance rather than style. The desire to be live and instantaneous shares the same instincts, but with appearance preceding substance. What matters, in the strive to be live, is presence rather than revelation. It is about covering rather than uncovering the world.

This rhetoric of presence can be related, in part at least, to the development of digital technology and to the increasing lightness and mobility of equipment: we *must* see the world because we *can*. If this appears to take the argument full

circle towards a technologically-driven account once more, however, then there is more to be said.

Consider the role of correspondents-on-the-spot who are delivering a real-time commentary on the events which are unfolding around them. How might we understand the function of these individuals in the live mediation of the event? We can note, first of all, Daniel Dayan's suggestion that they are there to reinject 'the lost aura of the event':

One wonders why these special or local correspondents are used at all, since they ... see less than their studio counterparts who monitor the output from many cameras. One might answer that their function, perhaps, is to know less, to be pressed in the crowd, elbowed, pushed around, frantically trying to perceive, see or guess ... They are there to restore the sense of distance, or specific involvement in this or that partial aspect ... By their frantic and futile attempts to see and know, they are in charge of reinjecting the lost aura of the event.

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(Dayan and Katz, 2003: 96) ebrary

Such individuals, in other words, relay for the audience what it is like to be present, offering us a vicarious experience of the event and instantiating the situatedness which would be ours if we were there. Aura, as Benjamin puts it, 'is tied to ... presence' (Benjamin, 1992: 233). To reinject 'the lost aura of the event' is thus to restore a sense of presence, to offer the viewer an encounter with the unmediated event even as it is mediated for us by the broadcaster, to deliver a spasmodic but concentrated burst of *hereness* to set against the broadcasters' inevitable distancing from the event.

The rapid recourse to eyewitness testimony which we increasingly find in live catastrophe coverage can similarly be said to be related to this question of presence. Just like the repeated exhortations to the audience to look and see for themselves which I discussed earlier in the chapter, the proliferation of eyewitness accounts contributes to the production of a rhetoric of immediacy and demediation. Through appeals to the veridicality of the image, through the deployment of user-generated material and eyewitness accounts, television offers to presence viewers at the live event, either by positioning them as mediated observers or via the testimony of individuals who can instantiate for the audience what it would feel like to be there. As we saw in Chapter 4, the live event, at its most felicitous, transports us, sweeps us away into a moment which is unfolding in the *now* of our encounter with it. The phenomena which we have been examining in this chapter similarly work to approximate to and/or to substitute for a presence which cannot be ours if we are not actually there, but which television must work to construct in its moment-by-moment staging of the real.

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7.5 Time, Space and Interactivity

As we saw in the previous section, the transformation from a more indirect to a more direct form of encounter with the breaking news event can be attributed to a number of interrelated factors. Some of these have to do with questions of affordance: television, in 1963, did not possess the technology either to

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communicate rapidly in real time with dispersed and mobile individuals or to deliver images live from the scene, unless the machinery of transmission had been set up in advance. Others have to do with a shift to a news ecology with a strongly competitive ethos and a corresponding dilution in those traditional journalistic values which had privileged the reliability of the source over the delivery of immediacy, and which therefore had little recourse to unverifiable testimony from individuals on the ground. Yet others have to do with discourses of authenticity and presence, which proffer the 'real', the 'genuine' and the immediate as markers of television's ability to reproduce the auratic event. If television, in other words, now offers in the early moments of live catastrophe coverage both to position us as mediated witnesses to distant events and to demediate the event for us through the testimony of co-present individuals, then it does so because it can, and because it is driven by competitive pressures to do so, and because its own discourses of immediacy and presencing require this kind of enactment.

These new patterns of interactivity give rise, in turn, to a number of interesting phenomenological implications. In what follows I will consider two of these: the blurring of the boundaries between different participant roles in the event, and the paradox which arises from television's demediation of the event.

We can begin to think about these questions by returning to a brief consideration of the different locales which are implicated in the delivery of the live event. As I outlined in the previous chapter, we can distinguish three significant nexi which are bound up in the event: the place in which stuff happens, the place from which television speaks the event and the place of reception. Broadcasting, typically, maintains a spatial separation between at least two of these, the place of the television event and the place of reception: hence Scannell's comment that broadcasting involves a 'doubling' of place (Scannell, 1996: 79). Each of these places, furthermore, has a characteristic set of roles associated with it: viewers, in the place of reception; presenters or performers (and in some cases a live audience), in the place from which television speaks; and participants or bystanders, in the place of the event.

As a direct consequence of the interactive transformations which I have traced in this chapter, the boundaries between these roles – and the spatial separation between the different places of the event – begin to break down. As a preliminary example of this phenomenon we can consider the anchors on the rooftops overlooking the Twin Towers on 9/11. Aaron Brown, for instance, alternates between a meditation on what he can see and hear himself as a co-present individual, and a commentary on the view of the event which he shares with the audience at home, which is visible to him on the monitor that has been set up on the roof. In doing so, he positions himself not only as a bystander but as a presenter (exhorting the audience at home to look and see for themselves) and as a viewer, locating himself at one and the same time in the place of the event (overlooking Lower Manhattan), the place from which television speaks (the rooftop) and the place of reception (watching the monitor):

And there as you can see perhaps the second tower, the front tower, the top portion of which is collapsing. Good Lord. There are no words, you can see large pieces of the

building falling, you can see the smoking rising, you can see a portion the side of the building just being covered on the right side as I look at it covered in smoke, this is just a horrific scene and a horrific moment.

(CNN)

A similar collapsing of boundaries occurs in those situations where eyewitnesses make explicit reference not just to their unmediated view of the scene but also to the event as it is simultaneously playing out in a mediated form in their immediate vicinity. The CNN producer Rose Arco, for instance, was on hold, on the phone to the CNN control room and listening to CNN radio when she saw from the window of the apartment a man jumping from one of the towers (Gilbert et al., 2002: 49); like Brown on the rooftop she was thus simultaneously accessing the event in a mediated form (via the radio), contributing to the narrative construction of the event (on the phone) and viewing it as a direct eyewitness. And here is a member of the public, live on CBS, who is again both audience and co-present bystander at one and the same moment:

At that point all the news media started to learn about it and I turned on my radio, and while I was sitting at my desk I saw a second jet, fairly large plane, fly in over the south end of Manhattan and deliberately flying directly into the Trade Center before my eyes.

(CBS)

Or consider the case of the airline passengers on a plane which was preparing for an emergency landing in Los Angeles in September 2005. Many of them were watching cable news channels which were covering their situation live on air, thus simultaneously positioning themselves as participants and as viewers. As one passenger would comment later to the *LA Times*, 'My friend said: Hey dude, something's wrong with our plane. We're on TV' (*The Guardian*, 23 September 2005).

These kinds of examples clearly demonstrate the way in which both the increasingly complex connectivity of the event and the heightened mobility of electronic forms of communication have come to blur the line between participant and viewer, between anchor and eyewitness. The 1963 NBC broadcast maintained a clear distinction between the roles of individuals caught up in the event: the anchors in the studio who were there to relay the news to the audience at home, and who were unable to experience what was transpiring in either a mediated or an unmediated form; the correspondent-on-the-spot whose responsibility was information gathering, and who had limited licence to reproduce a narrative of personal experience based on what he had seen and heard in person. A parallel separation was maintained between the different places that were implicated in the event: the locales in which stuff was happening (Dealey Plaza; the Dallas Trade Mart; the Dallas Memorial Hospital; Washington), the places from which the event was spoken (the NBC studio and the studios of its affiliate in Dallas), and the places of reception (the terminal points, from which one could view television's delivery of the event but could not speak it). In the case of 9/11 and subsequent live catastrophe coverage, by contrast, members of the public and professionals may come to contribute to the discursive formation of the event

even as they witness what is going on as co-present individuals and/or consume it via live media.

One significant consequence of this blurring of boundaries is what we might refer to as the *paradox of demediatization*. The coverage of the Menezes shooting in 2005 will serve as an excellent example of what I have in mind here. Consider, for example, the live eyewitness testimony concerning Menezes' behaviour at Stockwell Station. One eyewitness saw a man vaulting over the ticket barriers and running down into the underground, followed by a number of police officers. Another eyewitness saw men running on to the train. Based on the developing story, the eyewitnesses assumed that the first man was Menezes, and thus described the behaviour of the individuals they had seen in terms of a notion of *pursuit*:

I was sitting on the uh uh tube train, it hadn't pulled out of the station at this time but the doors were still open. I heard um a lot of shouting, get down, get out. I looked to my right, I saw a chap run onto the onto the train um Asian guy um he ran onto the train sort of [—] he was running so fast he half sort of tripped but he was being pursued by three guys, one had a black handgun in his hand, left hand, uh as he sort of went down two of them sort of dropped onto him to hold him down and the other one fired the gun, I heard five shots ... I was maybe four or five yards along where this accident happened, I I watched it.

This notion, widespread in the eyewitness testimony, was in turn taken up and treated as a given by BBC News 24 in their coverage:

From the eyewitnesses you've spoken to, is it clear why the police were pursuing this man into the train?

... there is a lot of speculation, people here suggesting that this man had been pursued, followed, they knew what they were dealing with and they had challenged him, although I must say no-one heard such a challenge, and therefore he was shot.

So just to recap on the events of the last hour and a half, we're through eyewitness accounts getting piecing together a picture of what happened at Stockwell this morning, just after 10 o'clock. All those eyewitnesses say that a man ran jumped the barriers at Stockwell tube station, ran onto the Northern Line station, onto the train, hotly pursued by plain clothes officers who shot five times into his body at close range and killed him. Mayhem then ensued, mayhem and panic the words which come up repeatedly again and again of the response from the people on the platform and on the train at Stockwell.

There were two key eyewitnesses that we spoke to very early after just arriving here ... uh one man said he was in the in the uh the main concourse of the rather small station here and he saw a man run past him, now he said he couldn't um describe him uh but he ran past, this man, then vaulted over the ticket barriers ... and then ran down into the uh into the bowels of the station and the man was pursued by several armed police officers according to this eyewitness uh who uh who then chased him into the station and the eyewitness said he heard several bangs a bit like a shot gun before he then ran off out of the station, the eyewitness that is.

It rapidly became clear in the aftermath of the event that this was not an accurate account. As the BBC's website would later put it: 'CCTV footage is said to show the man walking at normal pace into the station, picking up a copy of a free newspaper and apparently passing through the barriers before descending the escalator to the platform and running to a train. He boarded a Tube train, paused, looking

left and right, and sat in a seat facing the platform'. One eyewitness later told a newspaper that the man vaulting the barrier must have been a police officer.⁴

BBC News 24 was by no means alone in its generation of an inaccurate and misleading account of what had happened at Stockwell. Menezes was shot, according to eyewitnesses, because he was wearing a thick coat, which was odd on a hot day in July; furthermore he was running away from the police. He was Asian; possibly Pakistani; there was a smoking package and a strong chemical smell in the air at Stockwell Station; according to one account he 'appeared to be wearing a "bomb belt with wires coming out"';⁵ he was shot five times. None of this, it turned out, was correct. Menezes, according to a member of the police surveillance team and also the CCTV footage, was wearing a blue denim jacket and not a thick coat; there was no bomb belt, and no wires. He was not Asian, let alone Pakistani, but Brazilian. There was no smoking package and no smoke. Nor was he shot five times: the post-mortem examination showed that he had been shot seven times in the head, and once in the shoulder, and that a further three bullets had missed him.

It is here that the paradox of demediation enters the picture. As I suggested in the previous section, we can make sense of television's increasing reliance on eyewitness testimony in terms of a staging of the real, a demediation of the event in the course of which co-present individuals come to instantiate for the remote audience what it is like to be there. The testimony of the eyewitness, furthermore, is typically accorded a more authoritative status than the accounts of others whose knowledge is acquired at a remove. Peters (2001: 715) cites Locke here, who argues that the credibility of testimony diminishes in proportion to its distance from the 'original truth':

A credible man vouching his knowledge of it is a good proof; but if another, equally credible, do witness it from his report, the testimony is weaker; and a third, that attests the hearsay of a hearsay, is yet less considerable. So that *in traditional truths, each remove weakens the force of the proof*; and the more hands the tradition has successively passed through, the less strength and evidence it receives from them.

(Locke, 1964: 258, cited in Peters, 2001: 715, original emphasis)

Eyewitnesses, however, are not conduits through which the event speaks itself; they are individuals who mediate the event as they speak it, and whose mediation of the event imposes a structure of interpretation upon the material which they enunciate. Their testimony is, furthermore, notoriously unreliable (Allport and Postman, 1948: 54). As Peters himself goes on to argue, every act of testimony is thus at the same time an act of mediation:

A private experience enables a public statement. But the journey from experience (the seen) into the world (the said) is precarious ... No transfusion of consciousness is possible. Words can be exchanged, experiences cannot.

(Peters, 2001: 710)

⁴<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4158832.stm> (accessed 1 September 2005).

⁵<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4706787.stm> (accessed 1 September 2005).

The attempt to demediatize the event through the delivery of first-hand testimony from those who were there can thus paradoxically lead to a conflict between competing mediations of the event. This becomes clear from a further examination of the BBC News 24 material. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) write, much of the work of journalists now has less to do with controlling the rate at which information can be released and more to do with 'helping audiences make sense of it'. The following examples demonstrate just this process at work, as the BBC News 24 anchor attempts to make sense of competing eyewitness accounts of the event by requesting clarification from a correspondent-on-the-spot and then from a security expert in the studio:

Andy, make some sense of all this, can you, can you piece it together. I mean we had a graphic eyewitness account of a man who saw another man being shot dead by police, we've heard from other passengers on a different train of a smoking package in a carriage?

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Gordon it's all very mystifying, isn't it, what happened and why it it seems as if there were two incidents at Stockwell Station. We've just heard very graphically of how police pursued a man onto the carriage and shot him dead but we heard earlier from other eyewitnesses on a different train talking about smoking coming from a carriage. Other passengers said they saw a package apparently smoking there was a very strange industrial smell.

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In their attempts to make sense of competing mediations of the event, the anchors even attempt to recruit the eyewitnesses themselves as arbitrators. Not surprisingly, this causes a certain amount of confusion:

Anchor Now that you've heard a few more details about what's happened there about Scotland Yard confirming that they shot dead a man, does anything that you saw, does it fit into any pattern you can recognize?

E/w um um in in in what way, I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand what you're asking.

Anchor Well since you were there clearly you weren't directly involved in seeing anybody suspicious or any uh smoking packages or anything like that but now that you know that a man was shot dead uh one one of those tube trains and we've heard from other eyewitnesses of on other train that there was smoke coming from it duh does it make any sense to you?

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E/w Well yeah I mean obviously um [—] the train that I was on was receiving people from the opposite platform who had directly witnessed an incident and they were very very visibly shaken, they'd obviously seen somebody um they'd seen [—] police police they'd seen something occurred so yeah it completely ties in with that um but like I said I didn't actually see anything myself in directly related to the shooting I just saw the ensuing panic and the kind of aftermath of it, if you like.

The paradoxical consequences of demediatization and eyewitness testimony are by no means limited to this one event. As a further and useful example we can

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return to a brief consideration of the live catastrophe coverage on 9/11. The following, from CNN, will suffice to provide a flavour of what I have in mind here:

E/w I just heard another very loud bang and a very large plane that might have been a DC9 or a 747 flew past my window and I think it may have hit the Trade Center.

Anchor To be honest, Elliot, I didn't get I didn't get the impression that it was that big a plane.

Here the proliferation of eyewitness testimony and the blurring of the boundaries between participant roles have together led to a conflict between competing mediations of the event, as the anchor, a mediated witness to the second plane impact, enters into a disagreement with an eyewitness over the precise details of what has happened, as viewed from their respective vantage points.

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7.6 Absence, Presence and the Live Television Event

This is one of many scenarios that will take place in the future. The ability to know first hand how your partner or partners are responding while having sex. Not a week later, if at all, but in the moment. Not to mention that your partners are not in bed with you, but in different locations across the planet. You are actually experiencing euphoria via simulated telepresence sex with teletactile experiences.⁶

In a 1992 paper on virtual reality, Steuer discusses the extent to which mediated encounters can deliver a sense of being there, of being present in a remote environment. Following Minsky (1980), Steuer uses the term *telepresence* to examine this issue:

When perception is mediated by a communication technology, one is forced to perceive two separate environments simultaneously: the physical environment in which one is actually present and the environment presented by the medium. The term telepresence can be used to describe the precedence of the latter experience in favour of the former; that is, telepresence is the extent to which one feels present in the mediated environment, rather than in the immediate physical environment.

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(Steuer, 1992: 75)

Steuer's view is that an individual's sensation of telepresence varies in relation to two parameters, which he refers to as *vividness* and *interactivity*. The first of these has to do with the number of senses a communicative channel engages simultaneously. Interactivity, by contrast, is related to the extent to which we have the power to influence either the form or the content of the mediated environment (Steuer, 1992: 80).

A strong feeling of being there, on this account, would require both that a number of our senses are engaged with the remote locale and that we are able to act upon it in the real time of the encounter. If we return briefly to Evans' discussion of the remotely controlled submarine which we examined in Chapter 1,

⁶<http://www.natasha.cc/scx.htm> (accessed 8 August 2006).

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for example, then we can rank that experience as relatively highly interactive (insofar as the individual 'in the bowels of a ship' can pick up objects on the seabed); at the same time, it will be relatively low on the vividness continuum, if we assume that the operator has some way of seeing the objects that he is physically manipulating, but cannot smell, touch, taste or hear them. Something closer to a true virtual reality experience, such as the 'full teletactile bodysuit in which touch, impact will involve the whole body' which Virilio imagines in his dystopic study *Open Sky* (Virilio, 1995: 39), on the other hand, would seem to deliver a greater degree of vividness as well as preserving the interactivity of Evans' original case. In Steuer's schema, the 'teletactile bodysuit' would thus be regarded as delivering a high degree of telepresence, a strong sense of being there: in the terms that I outlined in Chapter 1 it would appear to be a relatively thick encounter, allowing the individual to see, hear and touch the remote environment.

Television, as I argued at the beginning of this book, is unable to deliver a thick encounter with the event. Just like Evans' submarine example, it is low on the vividness continuum; and whilst some live television genres provide a level of interactivity via the use of mobile phones and texting, their ability to deliver a feeling of control over the remote environment is limited to what can be achieved through verbal means alone: eliciting chat from a television presenter, entering a real-time competition, buying goods, inducing a performer on a soft-porn channel to wiggle or uncover a particular part of her anatomy.

In the conclusion to Chapter 1, I suggested that mediated interactions might possess a set of mechanisms to compensate for the thinness of this encounter between the viewer and the television event. I argued, furthermore, that they needed to be considered not simply in terms of their inadequacies when compared to canonical encounters but also in terms of the advantages and gratifications which they offer as a consequence of their ability to permit encounters at a distance.

This book is by no means the first work to cover this territory. Research over the last decades has suggested, for example, that 'para-social interactions' – encounters in which the remote viewer is given 'an illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer' (Horton and Wohl, 1986: 185) – are an important element in mediated communication. The para-social phenomenon of direct address to the audience has been discussed in relation to a number of non-fiction broadcast phenomena such as radio DJ talk (Montgomery, 1986), television chat shows (Tolson, 1985), documentaries (Corner, 1991), daytime magazine programmes (Moore, 1995), sports presenting (Whannel, 1992), newscasting, and television advertising (Corner, 1995; Ellis, 1992). The simulation of 'expressive eye contact' with the viewer (Corner, 1991: 32) via direct gaze to camera has also been discussed, as have a variety of linguistic markers such as colloquial speech rhythms (Corner, 1991), the occurrence of 'back-stage speech' (Moore, 1995) and the use of expressions such as *nowadays* as a 'reiterated assertion of a co-temporality' (Brunsdon and Morley, 1978: 19).

What is at stake in all of these instances is the use of an interpersonal mode which has the effect, to a greater or lesser extent, of re-situating performer and

audience within an interactional context which approximates to the norms of the canonical encounter. As Scannell puts it (1991: 2):

[W]hile the central fact of broadcasting's communicative context is that it speaks from one place and is heard in another, the design of talk on radio and TV recognises this and attempts to bridge the gap by simulating co-presence with its listeners and viewers.

In this chapter I have examined further aspects of the way in which television – and live television in particular – works to presence its audience. The comparison between the broadcasts in the immediate aftermath of the Kennedy assassination in 1963 and turn-of-the-century coverage of breaking news stories such as 9/11, 7/7 and the Menezes shooting has provided evidence of a shift from a more indirect to a more direct relation to the event. In the preceding sections I have described this transformation with particular reference to a growing emphasis on the moment of witness, and I have suggested that we can examine this phenomenon both in terms of the ability of presenters and audience to view what is happening in the moment of its unfolding, and in terms of the proliferation of live testimony from the place of the event. I have gone on to trace some interesting implications of this shift: the blurring or collapsing of boundaries between different participant roles and different places, and the multiple and conflicting mediations of the event which paradoxically come into being as a consequence of television's attempts to demediate the event by presencing the viewer. I have suggested, as well, a number of interrelated explanations for this continuing shift into a mode of presence-in-absence in live breaking news coverage: the pressures of a competitive news marketplace; the increasing availability of personal media and other forms of mobile communication-at-a-distance; a shift in the direction of a discourse of authenticity and the 'real' across many non-fictional television genres; and a powerful rhetoric of presence and immediacy which has come, as a consequence of these other transformations, to be a significant factor in the delivery of the live event.

If this notion of the presencing of the viewer permits us to inspect the kind of work which television must do to compensate for its inevitable distancing from the event, however, then it also allows us to reflect upon the advantages which complex connectivity delivers for encounters between remote individuals.

In Chapter 2 of this book we examined the notion of the simultaneity of elsewhere to which the individual has access through the real-time interactions afforded by electronic forms of communication. When the *New York Times*, in the aftermath of the *Titanic* disaster in 1912, commented with some wonder on the 'almost magic use of the air' to send messages speeding from one remote place to another it seems unlikely that the writer could have imagined the extraordinary communicative complexity which would ensue within a century. At any given moment, day or night, innumerable messages ricochet from one point to another, carried near-instantaneously between remote sites by media both wireless and wired. Pagers beep; phones ring; fax machines announce the imminent arrival of a new document; a sound on a computer indicates that a new email has arrived; a voice on the radio informs the listener about local weather conditions or rain hundreds of miles away or storm-force winds on another continent; on the

television a correspondent clutches a railing, nearly bowled over by the wind and drenched by sea spray as he delivers a live report from the site of an incoming hurricane to a viewer on the other side of the world. To seize upon some individual instant and attempt to map these communication flows in the manner of a time-and-motion expert charting the movements of individuals around a workplace would be an impossible endeavour: the world is thick with messages, invisibly crossing and re-crossing each other in apparently endless and interlinked circuits of interaction.

If we wish to preserve, in such a world, the kind of clear distinction between face-to-face and mediated encounters with which this book began, then we must take account not only of the extent to which the electronic media 'bring the world' into individual contexts of co-presence but also of the way in which they permit us to actively engage with a multiplicity of simultaneous elsewheres in which a cacophony of voices are speaking the event. It is, of course, still the case that it is the broadcaster who institutionally enunciates the event, with user-generated material and eyewitness accounts embedded and contextualized within the overarching narrative framework which television generates in the real time of transmission and reception. Developments in online participatory journalism and 'we media' (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004), however, make it clear that there are other models in circulation in which the distinctions between producer and receiver, mediated and direct witness, an institution and its publics, *here* and *there* continue to be eroded.

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