

HOWARD ROSENBERG

Death of Kennedy & Birth of TV News

The death of President John F. Kennedy—25 years today—marked the birth of television as a news medium of the immediate, inaugurating a video age of instant history in which national tragedies now unfold before us almost as they occur.

"Live" was nothing new to TV, of course. The medium had wobbled through its infancy in that form, becoming a raw chronicle of significant events as early as 1954, when ABC telecast the Army-McCarthy hearings that helped destroy the career of right-wing demagogue Joseph McCarthy.

But that was merely an early pit stop en route to the catastrophe in Dallas nearly a decade later.

Thereafter, TV would become America's near-instant replay for such epic calamities as the slayings of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the Vietnam War, terrorism in the '70s and '80s and the shooting of President Reagan in 1981.

The Camelot-ing of America is now complete. TV is so rampant with Kennedy remembrances these days—ranging from shrill exploitations to blind adorations to thoughtful retrospectives—that the sheer weight of them almost tends to trivialize the memory and flatten the horror of Dallas.

There is nothing trivial, however, about today's unique observance by cable's Arts & Entertainment network, which is rerunning—without commercials—NBC's original coverage of the Kennedy assassination.

At 10:56 a.m., A&E will interrupt its regular programming—just as NBC did 25

years ago—with word of Kennedy being shot. A specially taped introduction by Edwin Newman, who was an NBC correspondent at the time, will be followed by continuous actual coverage until 3:30 p.m., when the day's events will be capsulized in an edited 90-minute wrap-up.

More than merely a sad and melancholy archive piece that marked the start of America's grimmest decade since the Civil War era, the A&E special is an opportunity to observe network news in

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an earlier, pivotal stage of development—the evolutionary equivalent for television of what Cro-Magnon man was for humans.

There on the screen in living black and white from New York are Frank McGee, Chet Huntley and Bill Ryan, side by side on an austere news set, reading fragmentary reports from Dallas virtually as they come in.

Ryan: "The best indication we have now is that the President is still alive."

This is radio on TV, the talking heads and rudimentary technology looking almost prehistoric compared with today's

spit and polish.

A phone hookup is arranged with Robert MacNeil (now co-anchor of "The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour" on PBS), who is the NBC correspondent with Kennedy that day and has joined the other media at Parkland Memorial Hospital, where the wounded President is being treated.

Because the hookup doesn't work at first and only McGee can hear MacNeil, McGee has to repeat what MacNeil is telling him for the benefit of viewers. Then Ryan is handed a phone attachment for the receiver—you see all of this on camera—and he hands it to McGee. "Apparently, this will function as a speaker," he tells McGee. But it doesn't, at first. Then later it does. But McGee doesn't know it, so he repeats MacNeil anyway, becoming his echo.

Reports trickle in from Dallas. A "young man" is in custody. Later, Ryan calmly reads an AP Flash: "Two priests who were with President Kennedy say he is dead from bullet wounds." Still later, the "young man" in custody is identified as Lee Harvey Oswald.

Occasionally, NBC switches to Washington for Capitol Hill updates from David Brinkley. There are reports, too, from Martin Agronsky, smoke from an unseen cigarette curling in front of his face.

Later, there are live pictures showing crowds gathering outside the White House. And much later, there is raw videotape of the Kennedy motorcade just prior to the shooting, followed by sudden chaos as the President and then-Gov. John Connally are hit and the camera

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In memorable moment on Nov. 25, 1963, John F. Kennedy Jr. salutes his father's casket as other Kennedy family members look on. The President's assassination not only marked the beginning of a new period of disillusionment for the American people but also refined television's role as near-instant replay for epic calamities.

KENNEDY: Birth of TV News

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begins bouncing wildly.

What marathon, heroic work by McGee and Ryan (Huntley shortly disappears)—staying on the air with only a few sketchy details to report in the beginning, undercut by crippling technical problems and facing enormous pressure, yet never panicking as Frank Reynolds did during ABC's coverage of the aftermath of the Reagan shooting.

McGee and Ryan are so composed, in fact, that they seem to be in a time warp or isolation booth, separated from the shock and commotion of Dallas as if they were actors in a dream-like fantasy. Or perhaps the fantasy is only in the eyes of the 1988 viewer, reflecting a numbing desensitization caused by years of exposure to TV violence in newscasts and prime-time entertainment.

In any case, the cool professionalism of McGee and Ryan belied the surreal circus that was to follow in the next two days.

In an atmosphere that author William Manchester would later call "an MGM mob scene," the Dallas police immediately began surrendering to every TV whim and at one point even displayed a manacled Oswald on a platform so that cameras and reporters could get a better view. And it was mainly with TV in mind, reportedly, that police rejected a secret night transfer and agreed to move Oswald from city jail to county jail at noon on Sunday, the same day that Kennedy's casket was to be transferred from the White House to the Capitol.

Only NBC covered the Oswald transfer live, its camera showing an approaching Oswald surrounded by detectives, moving toward an armored car. Suddenly, Jack Ruby rushed forward and Oswald went

down from a gunshot as NBC's Tom Petit shouted: "He's been shot! Lee Oswald has been shot! There is panic and pandemonium . . .!"

Ruby's murder of Oswald looked like a scene from a cheap gangster movie. Along with the Kennedy assassination, however, it was a harbinger of things to come in broadcast news, beamed to America's homes like that year's "77 Sunset Strip" or "Perry Mason" as part of a medium where everything—even the worst of crimes—ultimately would emerge as entertainment.

A newspaper ad for a Kennedy remembrance on Monday's "Entertainment Tonight" made the point in glitzy 1988 style. "Hollywood Stars: Where were they and how did they feel on that tragic day?"

Life—and television—go on.