

USA TODAY

1/27/92

TV news and revisiting history

'JFK' and the Quayle reassessment offer important lessons for television news.

What do you call a re-examination of events and their meaning after three years have passed? After 30 years? History?

It is my guess that historians would regard 30 years as a sufficient pause while three years would be inadequate. But then, there are all sorts of historical analysis, and if the main object of the reassessment is to get the facts straight, historians probably demand less time separation.

This winter is featuring two interesting revisits: the assassination of our 35th president and the characterization of our vice president. One is taking place in theaters across the nation, while the other was page one for a week in *The Washington Post* and will be a book. One unfolds in an entertainment medium while the other is presented as news.

Both are aimed at reinforcing a nation. Both proceed from the premise that the nation is ill-informed. Inherent in both is that the chroniclers did not get it right the first time.

Oliver Stone, the creator of the movie *JFK*, believes, one presumes, a conspiratorial plot resulted in President John F. Kennedy's death. He has woven truth

and theory to rewrite history. And, it is hard to overstate the influence of moving pictures and sound on a public with limited information about the events depicted.

This is especially true for a generation who did not experience the tragedy and who spend more time with television than with books and newspapers. I suspect Oliver Stone is



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LOOKING BACK AGAIN: Both the late President John F. Kennedy and Vice President Dan Quayle, above, have had their stories revised, JFK by moviemaker Oliver Stone, right, and Quayle by newspaperman Bob Woodward, far right.



AP Photos

a historian to them.

Camera angles, sound and storytelling often define the television generation's view of reality. And, while television news should not be confused with a filmmakers' docudrama, there are similar demands to reach viewers' emotions.

First, news without interesting visuals is frequently not news. The seemingly intractable imbalance in the trade relationship between the United States and Japan was largely left to the business pages until President Bush traveled to Japan. Contrast that with coverage of police brutality by the Los Angeles Police Department accompanied by video of the police beating Rodney King.

"Talking heads" engaged in a dispassionate discussion of say, education, often fail to meet the television news test. The so-called "sound bite" has become briefer and briefer, although add some passion, a few tears say, and you are guaranteed Andy Warhol's 15 minutes of fame.

Unfortunately, too often the reality is that interesting visuals characterized by attractive people becomes reality.

Just as Bob Woodward and David Broder decided an erroneous portrayal of Vice President Dan Quayle must be straightened out, those who control television news should constantly reassess their medium.

Television news should not necessarily mirror the newspaper. Nor do the newspapers always get it right. In fact, one of this nation's great strengths is that in addition to practicing free speech we protect pluralism. Pluralism provides a valuable check on ignorance and arrogance. Pluralism, not the FCC, should be the nation's protector.

There should, however, be sobering and instructive understanding on the part of television executives that the most compelling news source today is television. To the extent television operates more like film, it simply won't get it right.

If we, individually and collectively, are going to learn from our nation's experiences, we must have an accurate account of those experiences.

Our knowledge should not hinge on whether there are interesting visuals or how they are used.



USA TODAY
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