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# Research Notes:

## Experiments in ETV: Effects of edited cutaways

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The extreme sensitivity of a viewing audience to the most incidental of visual cues in TV presentation is illustrated by the previous papers in this series<sup>1,2</sup>. And recent analyses of human interaction<sup>3</sup> indicate viewers' detailed awareness of actual incongruities in performance. It is apparent, for example, that an integral role in normal conversation is played by the non-verbal aspects of encounter such as facial expression, posture, gesture, and eye-movement. When these features of a social interaction are lacking—as in intercom or walkie-talkie conversations—untrained individuals experience considerable difficulty in sustaining it; and rules are required to overcome these problems ('Over', 'Over and Out', 'Roger'). In broadcasting, the unusual situation arises where social interactions are not only disturbed, but actually faked. The technical and logistic problems of location filming, for example, render it more practical to edit together the material from one camera than to involve two cameras and the facilities for alternating between them. So, in the one-camera interview, shots are first taken of the respondent, and those of the interviewer are postponed until the discussion is over, when he is called on to ask the same questions again, give reaction shots, and so on. Even trained professional interviewers report problems with this procedure, being frequently required to present their questions and reactions to the thin air. And one well-known television performer informs the authors that, if the actual interviewee has by this time left the scene, she can only give an adequate performance if one of the film crew stands in for him.

To an untrained performer of the type frequently involved in the production of educational materials, such problems can be extreme. He has to speak to a lens and not to another face. Or he has to pretend to speak to a person who is no longer there. In neither situation does he gain any feedback about the audience's reaction to him. And if he is reading his lines from an autocue device he must aim to create the illusion that he is not. The situation is totally removed from that of normal interaction, where feedback in the form of nods, smiles, looks of interest or boredom play such a vital part. And it is reasonable to suppose that the distorted behaviour of 'camera-shy' individuals stems from precisely this lack of normal feedback information. To the sensitive audience even the slightest disturbance in the natural flow of a performance can be distracting; and the occasional inappropriate nod, smirk or non sequitur in cutaway filming is certainly registered by those privileged viewers who understand the editing technique employed. The extent to which an uninformed audience may be sensitive to these distortions, however, remains an interesting question. If audience reactions to aspects of a production are affected by the technique, one would certainly expect it to have some influence of the material's actual impact.

### The experiment

An experiment was conducted to test whether the edited insertion of cutaways in a televised interview can have a measurable effect on the viewer's perceptions of the performer involved. A studio setting was used, in which the two partici-

pants in the interview faced each other in easy chairs. The interviewer, a lecturer in English Literature with acting experience was asked to choose his own interviewee and to conduct a discussion on whatever they pleased. Two cameras were used, one giving a fixed shot of the interviewer, and the other a varying shot of the interviewee. The videotaped recording was directed *extempore* giving maximum coverage to the respondent, and occasional shots of the interviewer asking questions and reacting to the replies. As the discussion (on the respondent's latest book of poetry) took place, an assistant noted the questions posed; and when it was over the interviewer was asked to repeat them *in vacuo*—i.e. deprived of the interactive feedback normally available from the respondent—and to give a few standard reactions as though the edited cutaway technique was routine studio practice.

The introduction and early part of the interview was then isolated, lasting 3½ minutes. Two versions of it were presented, one each to a separate student audience. While one group saw the straight two-camera presentation of the discussion as it actually evolved, the other saw an edited assembly in which the interviewer shots were replaced by the post hoc cutaways. The shots of the respondent were identical in both versions; and at no stage in the experiment was the interviewer aware of its purpose. In the construction of the edited version, care was taken to ensure that the continuity and natural quality of the apparent interaction between them was as far as possible preserved—hence the choice of an actor in the preparation of the cutaway material.

By the use of psychological rating scale techniques, audience

assessments were collected concerning the interviewer. In the edited version he was seen as very significantly more tense than in the natural version, despite his actor's ability to behave naturally in a highly artificial situation. More interesting from the ETV point of view, however, is the fact that he was also seen as significantly more sincere and more straightforward in this situation. It would appear that the apparent conviction and clarity of his performance were improved despite his evident strain in giving it. On this occasion at least, the careful use of editing facilities was thus seen to have a beneficial influence on the production's likely value. In debriefing the subjects after the experiment, it was established that none was familiar with edited cut-away techniques; and their susceptibility to its unpredicted effects, despite this, points to the care that must be taken in the editing of material for educational purposes generally. For when less deliberately used the same one-camera cutaway technique certainly has more extreme effects. And when accompanied by less favourable performance traits than observed here, an increase in a performer's perceived tension alone would certainly have a detrimental effect on the presentation's impact.

Further experiments would help to explain these effects more fully, and to determine whether they were specific to the videotaped material used in this experiment alone. While this is likely, the results suggest that the edited cutaway technique may also have a more valuable general role than previously foreseen. The increase in the interviewer's clarity in the edited situation may well derive from the more concise interview structure which the technique imposed. Any unscripted and thereby unstructured TV situation is likely to present the viewer with more unravelling problems than one in which the visual treatment proceeds deliberately apace with predetermined content. And editing techniques may be deliberately used to formalize an open-ended situation by clarifying the boundaries

between successive stages in the content's development.

### Discussion

Conventionally, of course, the use of the technique examined above is primarily expedient. If it were always as easy and cheap to use two cameras to achieve the desired effect as it is to use one we would always be likely to do so. But the reasons for production strategy in educational broadcasting, and those which apply conventionally, are not necessarily the same. In ETV we are frequently compelled to use as performers experts who never fully master the performance skills that the medium demands. We are also responsible to an audience who may have little or no intrinsic interest in the information under treatment. And however skilled the presenter may seem to us, it is useful to assume that an audience finds him positively tedious. In doing so we recognize the need to do something about it, and that we have access to a bottomless bag of tricks for varying and interpreting the visual information which we help present.

We could throw a speaker off the set in favour of someone more inspiring. If this is not possible we should certainly seek to vary the visual treatment apace with content. If the content suggests no variation in the visual presentation—and a talking head is all we have to show—then we may question whether television is the medium we should be using at all. And if we decide that it is, we should certainly seek to vary the presentation occasionally for the simple sake of variety alone. As Roberts points out,<sup>4</sup> the concentration of both eye and ear on a single source presents an unnatural psychological strain and the simple manipulation of visual form through editing, or the presentation of a speaker in the heightened context of either background or audience reaction, seems to modify the viewer's attitude to the presentation and by implication to the speaker himself.

While we may deliberately underestimate the audience's level of

involvement in a programme, the present series of data reminds us of the medium's power to influence the most basic attitudes to a performer in the simplest of ways. Moreover, the psychological literature cited in an earlier report,<sup>1</sup> and by Duck & Baggaley,<sup>3</sup> suggests that viewers use these simple external cues in deciding whether other more complex aspects of presentation—such as a speaker's verbal delivery—are worthy of their attention. So any evidence of the unintended effects associated with particular production techniques in this manner, indicates not only the need for ETV producers to exercise caution in applying them, but also the greater possibilities for their educational usage.

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