

Dan Rather goes high-tech

By **SAM LOGAN**
Eagle staff writer

The developing changes in electronic technology will make Jules-Verne style futuristic fantasies seem like "See Spot Run," Dan Rather told members of the International Association of Business Communicators at a multi-state conference's opening session at the College Station Hilton.

The CBS Evening News managing editor and anchor of "48 Hours," who is a native Texan and a graduate of Sam Houston State, was scheduled to speak in person. But breaking news developments with the O.J. Simpson trial verdict and Hurricane Opal along the eastern Gulf Coast preempted his visit, which was finally achieved by satellite hook-up.

More than 300 people from 12 states and Canada heard Rather's presentation and then many filed to the microphone to ask questions, which he answered via the big screen, during the conference hosted by the Brazos Chapter of IABC.

Electronic technology is changing so rapidly that it is hard for experts to keep up, much less the general public, and these changes will dictate much of how both journalists and the public perceive and use the coming deluge of information, Rather said.

"When we talk about electronic changes we are usually thinking about cables and fiber optics and telephone lines and other delivery systems," he said. "As these changes come about we journalists and communicators must think about the quality of programming and ethics.

"We know there'll be a lot more electronic outlets in the future. For instance, I own a camp house up the river from New York City. With satellite dish I can get 40 TV channels, but it won't be long before most citizens can get up to 500 channels," Rather said.

Rather asked, "What will be on these channels?"

Then he answered his own question.

"There will surely be a lot more talk shows, because they are cheap and easy to produce," he said. "There will also probably be programs designed with specialized information, and likely other formats will develop."

Rather said there would be more competition between cable operators, more direct broadcasting over telephone lines, and networks as we now know them may not exist for many more years.

"It may not be long into the future when people can dial up anything they



Eagle photo/Dave McDermand

Newsman Dan Rather, who was supposed to appear at the Hilton in College Station in person, instead showed up to address a large group Friday morning via satellite. Rather spoke to the group about coming advances in technology and how they will affect news and the media.

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to know about on their own home computers, but it is not just the technology that is changing," he said.

News is no longer the property of journalists, and some journalists are not the traditional standardbearers who used to be trained to be independent and as objective as possible, he said.

Today many communicators in television, radio and even some print media have goals not to objectively inform the public but to persuade their audiences to a particular point of view, whether it be for religions, or political, or commercial, or social change or other reasons, the network anchor said.

"Persuasion by broadcasters is not wrong as long as people understand what it is," he said. "Among the 500 new cable channels the new producers may not feel the need to be honest brokers of the news.

"This means that the public needs to become more sophisticated in learning to know who is broadcasting what, and why."

America's free speech and press is unique in the world, he said.

"I'm not talking about the outright censorship of eastern block and Asian countries," he said. "Even the most advanced western countries have speech and press limitations and in some countries journalists work for the state, but we believe American citizens are mature enough to understand the bitter truth."

There are also dangers as people begin to expect instant information, according to Rather.

He said when President Kennedy was faced with the Cuban missile in the 1960s, his advisers told him he had 10 days in which to plan and negotiate a strategy to avoid nuclear war.

"Today the president has less than hour before his credibility begins to suffer," he said.

"Perhaps some new burst in democracy will be derived from these changes, but remember that spontaneity is not always a virtue, especially when calm thought and reason are needed."

Rather also said that when one talks about change, he is already outdated, and that those who use a crystal ball often have to eat a lot of glass.