The Downward Spiral of Television News

A veteran news executive notes that increasing attention to ratings and the bottom line is cheating the public. | By Av Westin
Something very dangerous is happening to broadcast journalism.

Start with this: Last August and September, just before the opening of the current prime-time season, executive producers, producers and correspondents working on news magazines at ABC News found their story selections being questioned for their audience appeal by an executive from ABC network headquarters in Hollywood. His concern was not the quality of the journalism but rather whether the pieces would help the ratings of the prime-time news magazines in the fall season.

Underlying this close attention is the fact that ABC television suffered a ratings debacle in the 2001-02 season and corporate management was taking every conceivable step to ensure that it did not happen again. Since the news magazines compete in prime time for ratings against cop shows or hospital dramas, it apparently is the policy of the network to insert entertainment-oriented executives into what previously were the inviolate decision-making processes of the news division. It is, unfortunately, not a surprising development but a logical extension of a trend that has been accelerating in the past few years. Since the 90’s, when the bottom line became paramount, it has trumped the editorial line every single time and the pre-screening of news department product for ratings potential is just another instance of what is now a truism in the television business.

In the beginning, in the days of Bill Paley and Frank Stanton at CBS, David Sarnoff and Bob Kintner at NBC and Leonard Goldenson at ABC, television news departments were often described as the “jewel in the crown” of the networks. Money was allocated for news coverage because top management believed it was the right thing to do. It was not unusual for budgets to be augmented and for regularly scheduled programming to be interrupted if special events required more funding or more airtime. News was a “loss leader,” bringing prestige but little or no monetary profit, but bringing the networks and aggressive stations tremendous prestige. In the early days, few local news operations made a profit. Some broke even; many lost money. That was part of the cost of being in the news business.

In 1970, things changed dramatically, illustrated by what happened at KCAU-TV in Sioux City, Iowa. KCAU-TV was affiliated with the ABC Television network which, in those days, was laughingly regarded as half a network in a three-network race. Usually, if a network is number one in the ratings, its local affiliates are strong in their markets; if the network is number three, the local stations also find their standing sagging. Even though ABC’s prime-time schedule was a distant third behind CBS and NBC,
the news programs at KCAU-TV were so widely watched in Sioux City that the overall station ratings remained respectable all night long. The quality of the news operation had developed viewer loyalty, which produced a ratings miracle. The message from KCAU-TV was not lost on other stations. If local news was strong, a station’s ratings could be strong and commercial time would sell for higher prices. All across the country in the early 70’s, the light bulb went on over the collective heads of station executives. The new conventional wisdom said “You can make money from the news!”

At first, as money-saving technological improvements came along (videotape, microwave transmission, satellite feeds) management invested most of the savings in more equipment and larger staffs. The rationale was simple: better news programming meant higher ratings, which meant increased revenue. But then, television news became the business of television news. Financial considerations like the bottom line and profit margins edged their way into becoming the paramount elements in decision making.

A significant push concentrated on ways to increase ratings. The local and network strategy: make sure that what was supplied was what viewers wanted to watch. One veteran executive producer puts it this way:

“Whoever is at home watching television creates the natural line for a lot of stories. There’s nothing wrong with that. A lot of tricks go back to tabloid journalism. I don’t necessarily consider ‘tabloid’ a nasty word, if it sells papers or sells soaps or sells us, and we get them in the tent.”

The “tabloidization” of news did not occur overnight. It evolved. Its roots are traceable as far back as 1964 when news on network television was redefined by the advent of the half-hour nightly news programs that doubled the amount of airtime devoted to news each night. Local news expanded too; from 15 minutes to a half-hour, to an hour and eventually to three-hour blocks in some markets. As producers looked for material to fill the programs they sensed a market for gossip, crime and glamour, and the trend toward “pop news” accelerated. Taking a name and an editorial cue from the tabloid gossip newspapers, syndicated “tabloid television” shows were created and rapidly caught the attention of viewers. Tabloid television shows pursued celebrities and murderers with equal vigor and unlike conventional news programs were more than willing to pay for access to stories. Their ratings success was not ignored in the network executive suites. Titillation meant ratings and even staid network news executives began covering stories that had previously been ignored. The result: lowered standards in news judgment and the beginning of the spiral of “dumbing down” the news.

To measure how different TV News is today compared to its earlier days, read the introduction to the CBS News Standards and Practices manual from 1976. Richard Salant, then president of CBS News, wrote the opening paragraphs of the manual, which was considered to be the bible of television news and public affairs for many years.

“It is particularly important that we recognize that we are not in show business and should not use any of the dramatic licenses—‘fiction which represents truth rationales’— or the underscoring
and the punctuation which entertain-
ment and fiction may and do properly
use. This may make us a little less inter-
esting to some, but that is the price we
pay for dealing with facts and truth
which may often be duller and with more
loose ends than fiction and drama.”

In Salant’s time, concerns for ratings
on the part of news management, if
they existed, were not transmitted to
the personnel who were actually produc-
ing the broadcasts. Today, they are pub-
lished weekly in newspapers, tracked
minute by minute by producers and are
even chewed over in hallway conversa-
tions by entry-level employees. In 1976,
“24/7” non-stop news coverage with its
relentless repetition of speculation and
rumor (frequently with no new details
reported for hours on end) did not exist.
Today, many of the techniques that

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Salant decried are accepted as news
“production values.” Indeed, they have
been adopted to heighten drama and
avoid being dull at all costs.

Make no mistake about it: quality has
been adversely affected by budget cuts.
The network news magazines have seen
reductions in their budgets for research
and in the number of days allotted to
shooting a story. Time in the editing
room to craft the finished product has
been shortened from an average of 5
weeks to sometimes less than two. Even
at the cash cow represented by 60 Min-
utes at CBS News, decisions have been
made to curtail overseas trips to secure
critical interviews for pieces. Producers
at 20/20 have developed a routine to

conduct multiple interviews. Groups of
individuals are flown to a central loca-
tion, a hotel room is rented and separate
interviews are conducted one after an-
other all day long. It saves money. Cost-
cutting is not limited to the magazine
programs. The networks have closed bu-
reaus overseas and rely more and more
on video purchased from outside suppli-
ers. Experienced (albeit highly paid) cor-
respondents have had their contracts
renegotiated or terminated if they did
not agree to pay cuts. At the local level,
the number of hours of news program-
manship has been increased at many sta-
tions while their staff size has been re-
duced. The bottom line trumps the edit-
orial line once again.

Budgetary restraints are one part of the
equation. The other, as we have said, in-
volves ratings and because of them, we
are already witnessing changes in network
standards for story selection. The previ-
ously cited veteran executive pro-
ducer put it this way:

“We’re looking
for the top sto-
ries of the day
and the stories that are going to attract
and hold an audience and keep people
coming back to this network. That’s
what the real world is about. That’s the
overall mission.”

That concern for holding the audi-
ence (ratings) is emerging as a factor in selecting the men and
women who present the news each
night. It is safe to say that the network
evening news program are no longer the
flagship broadcasts of the news divisions.
As a result, we probably have seen the
last class of major anchors on the
evening news programs and upon their
retirement, management will face a
choice between choosing successors based on journalistic credentials or on cosmetics and personality. What should an anchor be? If a checklist of anchor qualities is ever made, Walter Cronkite will provide the base line against which all comers must be measured. Cronkite “paid his dues” beginning with combat reporting in World War II, domestic and foreign assignments for United Press including Moscow during the Cold War, assorted Washington beats for radio news as well as local TV anchoring. By the time he arrived at the CBS Evening news in 1965, Cronkite knew how a story was generated, written, filmed, assembled and produced. In short, the viewer shared Cronkite’s confidence that he knew what was happening all the time.

When he was selecting the anchor for the ABC World News Tonight in 1978, Roone Arledge asked “If the President were assassinated, whom would you tune in to watch to tell the story?” A further question he asked was “When the President grants the three networks a joint interview, whom would you want to see up there for ABC News competing with the opposition?” Those questions probed for two primary qualities anchors must have as broadcast journalists: the ability to cover the big story, and the ability to represent the news organization they work for in direct competition and direct comparison with the competition.

Peter Jennings, Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw have the current equivalent of Cronkite’s résumé but when they yield their anchor chairs to the next generation, it is unlikely that their replacements will bring equal credentials to the job.

Given the current state of television news decision-making, personality and on-camera demeanor will be factored in to the nominations. Familiarity and rapport with viewers is now a consideration. Journalistic experience has been downgraded, becoming just one factor among many. The argument is made that if the anchor is perceived as trustworthy, sincere, serious, warm, enthusiastic, and so on, there is less chance that viewers will switch away to sample someone else. Habits of viewing become fixed and are very hard to break. Few people have multiple TV sets in their living rooms all tuned simultaneously to the evening newscasts. There’s not too much opportunity for side-by-side comparisons between one broadcast and another. The result is that once a news team, headed by an anchor, is found satisfactory, there is little motivation for change.

On-camera performance as an element in choice was tacitly acknowledged by NBC News when it named Brian Williams to replace Tom Brokaw. Williams, who has great charm, good looks and a staccato delivery style on the air will, nonetheless, show up at a lot of major news assignments in the next two years in order to “muddy his boots”, giving him the stature some feel he currently lacks. The plan is designed to develop an image of a reporter from the field rather than a news reader.

The anchors of today are presiding over programs whose content and formats are substantially different from those in place when they assumed their jobs decades ago. In the early ’70’s, the network evening news was described as an “illustrated headline service” whose editorial rationale was based on elimination rather than inclusion. The goal was to cover all the major events of the day.

The new leaders are part of a generation that learned its trade under management that emphasized the bottom line and ratings.
The men who are the current executive producers of the broadcast network news programs today offer a different definition affected by ratings pressures and by a different perception of audience needs and desires.

The notion that every major story has to show up in the broadcast is not a rule that is applied today. The evening news has changed and it continues to change because there are so many more sources: two, three, four cable outlets are doing news most of the time, plus the local stations are doing more and more of what used to be the exclusive provenance of the networks. Local reporters show up at conflicts in Israel, sports reporters are at the World Series and politicians in Washington court local anchors with “exclusive” interviews. As a result, the network evening news has evolved into a sort of mini-news-magazine; a combination of the news of the day, feature stories, and reports that merit more time or in-depth explanation.

Decision-making is done under almost unfathomable time pressures. Material is coming in from all over the world, pushing against deadlines that are the unalterable scheduled airtimes for the newscasts. Unlike a newspaper which can “Hold the Presses!” if there is a major late-breaking story, TV news programs have to begin when the sweep second hand on the studio clock clicks over to the hour or half-hour mark. Maintaining an editorial equilibrium under those conditions takes years of experience to accomplish. The anchors, who relish the role of managing editor, play a significant part in determining what goes on the air, in what order and for how long. The more experienced the anchor, the better the editorial guidance, not only for the production staff of the program but also for the correspondents who are reporting from the field. Satellite technology enables correspondents in the field to deliver their reports live while engaging in a colloquy with the anchor. The split screen with the anchor on one side and the reporter on the other has become a hallmark of news presentation. It adds immediacy (and production values) to the broadcast but it also adds to the requirements for editorial savvy on the part of the anchor. It’s another skill the person occupying that chair must have.

Peter Jennings, in particular, has mastered the technique of directing coverage of breaking news from his anchor’s chair. He demonstrates knowledge of the story and asks the prefect follow-up question so that the total spot provides information and perspective. This skill was apparent during the wall-to-wall coverage of the 9/11 tragedy. Jennings and Rather and Brokaw were on the air all the time. In effect they were editing the elements of the breaking story by selecting reports from their correspondents and expert guests, adding comments and insight. It was clear evidence that television news anchors are relied upon by American viewers for information and for clarity and reassurance. Whoever succeeds Jennings or Rather (Williams, as we have pointed out, is already Brokaw’s designated successor) will be expected to demonstrate the editorial astuteness to retain the confidence of the audience that he or she knows everything that should be known about the news of the day. (Remember the benchmark set by Cronkite.)

Selecting such an individual from among several candidates is not a sure thing by any means. Here’s why. The new leaders who are taking over at network and local newsrooms are part of a generation that learned its trade under management that emphasized the bottom line and ratings. Journalistic standards or the need for hands-on experi-
Television journalism has a propensity to get into a competition to be first with the obvious. In the wake of *60 Minutes* demonstrating that a television news program can be profitable, there has been, over the past 25 years, an enormous amount of pressure for television news to make money. You don’t make money, for the most part, by covering subjects like the economy, race relations, politics or foreign policy. You’re more inclined to make money by covering stories like the stain on Monica Lewinsky’s dress, or the O.J. Simpson story or the tiny tot beauty queen who was murdered.

“Those kinds of stories get a ton of coverage...The essence of journalism has to do with sorting out that which is important from that which is not. We tend to focus on the trivial and ignore the important.”