

# The New York Times

## And Now, a Word for Our Demographic

By Ted Koppel

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NOT all reporters have an unfinished novel gathering dust but many, including this one, do. If that isn't enough of a cliché, this novel's hero is a television anchor (always plant your pen in familiar turf) who, in the course of a minor traffic accident, bites the tip off his tongue. The ensuing speech impediment is sufficient to end his on-air career and he finds himself, recently divorced, now unemployed, at home and watching altogether too much television.

After several weeks of isolation he discovers on his voice mail a message from an old friend, the opinion-page editor of his hometown newspaper. She is urging him to write a piece about television news, which, after some hesitation, he does -- with a vengeance:

The earls and dukes and barons of television news have grown sleek and fat eating road kill. The victims, dispatched by political or special interest hit-and-run squads, are then hung up, displayed and consumed with unwholesome relish on television.

They wander the battlefields of other people's wars, these knights of the airwaves, disposing of the wounded from both armies, gorging themselves like the electronic vultures they are.

The popular illusion that television journalists are liberals does them too much honor. Like all mercenaries they fight for money, not ideology; but unlike true mercenaries, their loyalty is not for sale. It cannot be engaged because it does not exist. Their total lack of commitment to any cause has come to be defined as objectivity. Their daily preoccupation with the trivial and the banal has accumulated large audiences, which, in turn, has encouraged a descent into the search for items of even greater banality.

A wounded and bitter fellow, this fictional hero of mine, but his bilious arguments hardly seem all that dated. Now here I sit, having recently left ABC News after 42 years, and who should call but an editor friend of mine who, in a quirky convolution of real life's imitating unpublished fiction, has asked me to write this column examining the state of television news today.

Where to begin? Confession of the obvious seems like a reasonable starting point: I have become well known and well-off traveling the world on ABC's dime, charged only with ensuring that our viewers be well informed about important issues. For the better part of those 42 years, this arrangement worked to our mutual benefit and satisfaction. At the same time, I cannot help but see that the industry in which I have spent my entire adult life is in decline and in distress.

Once, 30 or 40 years ago, the target audience for network news was made up of everyone with a television, and the most common criticism lodged against us was that we were tempted to operate on a lowest-common-denominator basis.

This, however, was in the days before deregulation, when the Federal Communications Commission was still perceived to have teeth, and its mandate that broadcasters operate in "the public interest, convenience and necessity" was enough to give each licensee pause.

Network owners nurtured their news divisions, encouraged them to tackle serious issues, cultivated them as shields to be brandished before Congressional committees whenever questions were raised about the quality of entertainment programs and the vast sums earned by those programs. News divisions occasionally came under political pressures but rarely commercial ones. The expectation was

that they would search out issues of importance, sift out the trivial and then tell the public what it needed to know.

With the advent of cable, satellite and broadband technology, today's marketplace has become so overcrowded that network news divisions are increasingly vulnerable to the dictatorship of the demographic. Now, every division of every network is expected to make a profit. And so we have entered the age of boutique journalism. The goal for the traditional broadcast networks now is to identify those segments of the audience considered most desirable by the advertising community and then to cater to them.

Most television news programs are therefore designed to satisfy the perceived appetites of our audiences. That may be not only acceptable but unavoidable in entertainment; in news, however, it is the journalists who should be telling their viewers what is important, not the other way around.

Indeed, in television news these days, the programs are being shaped to attract, most particularly, 18-to-34-year-old viewers. They, in turn, are presumed to be partly brain-dead -- though not so insensible as to be unmoved by the blandishments of sponsors.

Exceptions, it should be noted, remain. Thus it is that the evening news broadcasts of ABC, CBS and NBC are liberally studded with advertisements that clearly cater to older Americans. But this is a holdover from another era: the last gathering of more than 30 million tribal elders, as they clench their dentures while struggling to control esophageal eruptions of stomach acid to watch "The News." That number still commands respect, but even the evening news programs, you will find (after the first block of headline material), are struggling to find a new format that will somehow appeal to younger viewers.

Washington news, for example, is covered with less and less enthusiasm and aggressiveness. The networks' foreign bureaus have, for some years now, been seen as too expensive to merit survival. Judged on the frequency with which their reports get airtime, they can no longer be deemed cost-effective. Most have either been closed or reduced in size to the point of irrelevance.

Simply stated, no audience is perceived to be clamoring for foreign news, the exceptions being wars in their early months that involve American troops, acts of terrorism and, for a couple of weeks or so, natural disasters of truly epic proportions.

You will still see foreign stories on the evening news broadcasts, but examine them carefully. They are either reported by one of a half-dozen or so remaining foreign correspondents who now cover the world for each network, or the anchor simply narrates a piece of videotape shot by some other news agency. For big events, an anchor might parachute in for a couple of days of high drama coverage. But the age of the foreign correspondent, who knew a country or region intimately, is long over.

No television news executive is likely to acknowledge indifference to major events overseas or in our nation's capital, but he may, on occasion, concede that the viewers don't care, and therein lies the essential malignancy.

The accusation that television news has a political agenda misses the point. Right now, the main agenda is to give people what they want. It is not partisanship but profitability that shapes what you see.

Most particularly on cable news, a calculated subjectivity has, indeed, displaced the old-fashioned goal of conveying the news dispassionately. But that, too, has less to do with partisan politics than simple capitalism. Thus, one cable network experiments with the subjectivity of tender engagement: "I care and therefore you should care." Another opts for chest-thumping certitude: "I know and therefore you should care."

Even Fox News's product has less to do with ideology and more to do with changing business models. Fox has succeeded financially because it tapped into a deep, rich vein of unfulfilled yearning among

conservative American television viewers, but it created programming to satisfy the market, not the other way around. CNN, meanwhile, finds itself largely outmaneuvered, unwilling to accept the label of liberal alternative, experimenting instead with a form of journalism that stresses empathy over detachment.

Now, television news should not become a sort of intellectual broccoli to be jammed down our viewers' unwilling throats. We are obliged to make our offerings as palatable as possible. But there are too many important things happening in the world today to allow the diet to be determined to such a degree by the popular tastes of a relatively narrow and apparently uninterested demographic.

What is, ultimately, most confusing about the behavior of the big three networks is why they ever allowed themselves to be drawn onto a battlefield that so favors their cable competitors. At almost any time, the audience of a single network news program on just one broadcast network is greater than the combined audiences of CNN, Fox and MSNBC.

Reaching across the entire spectrum of American television viewers is precisely the broadcast networks' greatest strength. By focusing only on key demographics, by choosing to ignore their total viewership, they have surrendered their greatest advantage.

Oddly enough, there is a looming demographic reality that could help steer television news back toward its original purpose. There are tens of millions of baby boomers in their 40's and 50's and entering their 60's who have far more spending power than their 18-to-34-year-old counterparts. Television news may be debasing itself before the wrong demographic.

If the network news divisions cannot be convinced that their future depends on attracting all demographic groups, then perhaps, at least, they can be persuaded to aim for the largest single demographic with the most disposable income -- one that may actually have an appetite for serious news. That would seem like a no-brainer. It's regrettable, perhaps, that only money and the inclination to spend it will ultimately determine the face of television news, but, as a distinguished colleague of mine used to say: "That's the way it is."

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