

MARKETPLACE

March 13, 2002 Wednesday

HEADLINE: Whether ABC will keep or oust "Nightline," after receiving a refusal from David Letterman to switch to that network

ANCHORS: DAVID BROWN

BODY:

DAVID BROWN, anchor:

This is MARKETPLACE. I'm David Brown, in for David Brancaccio.

We've all experienced pep rallies from managers, but the one ABC News employees received yesterday is making headlines. In his regular morning conference call with correspondents, executives and bureaus, ABC News chief David Westin challenged staffers to be 'more innovative, bold and competitive'; this in the wake of word that ABC had been in talks to replace one of the news division's staple programs, Ted Koppel's "Nightline," with late-night comedian David Letterman. A couple of days ago Letterman said he's sticking with CBS, but back at ABC, Koppel and staff are urging parent Disney Company to send a clear and unmistakable sign of support to "Nightline." Martin Kaplan is associate dean of USC's Annenberg School for Communication. He says that's not exactly what they're getting from Disney's CEO.

Professor MARTIN KAPLAN (USC's Annenberg School for Communication): Michael Eisner, the chairman of Disney, called Ted Koppel from one of the Disney parks opening in Europe to tell him how much he loved him. The question is whether that could put Humpty Dumpty back together again. The truth is that in Hollywood, people live under the illusion that everything is fine, until they discover that their jobs have been sold out from behind their backs. News isn't quite used to that, or at least hasn't been in the "Nightline" arena, because it's kind of had the equivalent of tenure. If any show had an ownership of a spot and of a prestige outlet, it's been "Nightline" through the years, but now that veil has been shredded.

BROWN: Isn't it somewhat naive? I mean, in a statement that some of the "Nightline" producers put out just a couple of days ago, they said that they're looking for what they call 'more than bland reassurances' that "Nightline's" going to stay on the air. Well, this is a business.

Prof. KAPLAN: Well, that's right, ABC is a business. Its job is to deliver eyeballs to advertisers. But the question is: If ABC is looking at what its product line mix is, to what degree does it want to have the absolute top-of-the-line product? Now in that case, that's Koppel. But there is only one *New York Times*, and many newspaper chains publish

nothing like *The New York Times*. They're content to have a number of tabloids or middlebrow or mass-market papers, which don't deliver what is regarded as the absolute crown jewel end of it.

ABC has the right, I think, to make the decision as to whether they deserve the title of purveying the highest quality or whether they're in the mud with everybody else.

BROWN: You know, it makes me think about the Tiffany Network moniker that used to be attached to CBS back in the days of Ed Murrow and Fred Friendly.

Prof. KAPLAN: Yes. And at the same time that Bill Paley was called the head of the Tiffany Network, he was producing "Hee-Haw" and "Petticoat Junction" and "The Beverly Hillbillies" and a range of other extremely lowbrow products, which paid the bills. And so in some ways, he had it both ways.

BROWN: Do you think that ABC executives can keep "Nightline" on the air after all of this, or do you think that there are going to be some changes?

Prof. KAPLAN: I think it's up to the audience. There was a Chicago station whose viewers rose up in fury when "Jerry Springer" was booked on the station, and by not watching the station, they forced the programmers to change within 24 hours that decision. So if viewers flock to "Nightline," if they say, 'Yes, there is a market for this,' then I think it has a chance. If they say, 'Nah, we're happy to try something new,' then it will go the way of every other product.

BROWN: Is there a larger danger to news in general on broadcast television, do you think?

Prof. KAPLAN: Well, I think news in general, not just on broadcast television, but in newspapers and all other outlets, is in some danger because for years our attention span has been shortening. The notion that there is something complex to be mastered is anathema in an instant-gratification culture. The challenge is: Can you produce news which is engaging and at the same time informative? That's the challenge for any broadcaster and for any newspaper right now.

BROWN: Marty Kaplan is director of the Norman Lear Center and associate dean at USC's Annenberg School for Communication.

Before we say goodbye to the subject of product mix in the media, some numbers here. Of the 25 top-rated shows this past week, according to the Nielsens, only one is an ABC program, and that one comes in at number 25, "The Practice." As for the late-night horse race, Leno led the pack last night, followed by "Nightline," with Letterman in third place.

LOAD-DATE: March 14, 2002