

MARKETPLACE

SHOW: Marketplace (6:30 PM ET) - SYND

May 28, 2002 Tuesday

HEADLINE: Martin Kaplan discusses Brian Williams succeeding Tom Brokaw as evening news anchor at NBC

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor:

Network television newscasts are not what they used to be, but combined in terms of audience numbers the top-three anchormen still mop the floor with their puny cable competition. But those anchormen are getting up there in age and so are their audiences. Today there's word that Tom Brokaw will step down from NBC "Nightly News" after the 2004 presidential election, making way for 44-year-old Brian Williams, most notably of MSNBC. Media business commentator Martin Kaplan is associate dean of the Annenberg School at USC. He says Williams is a fine-looking man.

Professor MARTIN KAPLAN (Annenberg School for Communication): I think Brian Williams is incredibly good-looking and a spectacular dresser, so there's the kind of shirt-ad image quality which he adds to the thing. It's a very classy, crisp, handsome kind of image. So...

BRANCACCIO: Give him an eye patch, he'd look like the man from the Hathaway shirts.

Prof. KAPLAN: Yes, exactly. The question, though, is whether that will attract the 18-to-49 demographic of people who are brand fickle and free spending that network would want to have, rather than the people who buy prescription items and incontinence devices, which is what the network news right now gets. I'm not sure that a young person, because Brian Williams is now the anchor, will say, 'Gosh, I'm going to stop getting my news from grazing the channels, watching CNN and MSNBC every few times during the day, getting it from the Internet, and, instead, I'm going to stop my life and watch the evening news.' That kind of change in behavior patterns I don't think will happen only because of an anchor change.

BRANCACCIO: The biggest question I could ask is if any of this matters, and it may matter in the sense that if lots of Americans don't turn to a few number of sources for news, you may lose that sense of the 'greens of the commons.'

Prof. KAPLAN: The electronic town square is truly what the network evening news still covers. If you put the evening news together, they add up to something like half of the viewing audience. And no cable station, no niche, no local news,

no newspaper can maintain that kind of hold. And, in fact, in the wake of September 11th, the country turned to the reliable network news anchors because they wanted to feel part of something along with their neighbors. So it's a terribly important piece of real estate. The problem is that what the network news has been doing with that real estate is shrinking the news hold. These days, when you get to the first commercial, basically, the hard news is over, and from there on, it's news you can use, news you can gossip about, celebrities and entertainment as news, news as entertainment. And I'm not sure that the arrival of a new anchor's going to change that.

BRANCACCIO: Marty, thank you. Martin Kaplan is also director of The Norman Lear Center at USC.

LOAD-DATE: May 29, 2002