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MARKETPLACE

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HEADLINE: Marty Kaplan discusses the challenges ahead for CNN

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BODY:

DAVID BROWN, anchor:

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

It may well be that unless you're a news junky, your first serious face time with the red CNN logo was during the Gulf War. The cable network racked up record audience numbers with its heavily produced coverage of that conflict. But Cable News Network has been in a slump of late, with viewership declining as its new rivals pick up strength. Walter Isaacson is promising a revamp. He's the new chairman and CEO of CNN. Here to talk with us about one of the biggest media stories of the week, Marty Kaplan. He's associate dean at USC's Annenberg School for Communication.

Marty, a big challenge for Isaacson here. Why is CNN having so much trouble keeping an audience?

Mr. WALTER ISAACSON (USC's Annenberg School for Communication): The truth is that, on a great day, CNN gets half a million to a million and a half viewers. It now has competition. It used to be the only 24-hour news channel, but now you have Fox and MSNBC and CNBC and the question is, is there an infinitely expandable audience for those shows? What MSNBC and Fox have done is to import edge and attitude and bias masquerading as neutrality and the problem for CNN is that when it was a unique brand, it was the only place to go for news around the clock. But now, absent a kind of mediathon—an O.J., a Gulf War with its own theme song--what is going to attract people to that?

BROWN: Are we going to start to see the newsmagazines that we've seen proliferate on MSNBC and--and such?

Mr. KAPLAN: Well, Walter Isaacson, the new head of CNN, has said, no, that won't be the case; that, in fact, great journalism doesn't have to be boring.

And he says that he's going to try to use what he did at Time magazine at CNN, so that, for example, more stories on science and technology and less foreign news. Now to some people, that is a mixed blessing, to think that that incredible American presence abroad is going to diminish its coverage of foreign news here in order to retain audience share is a real issue.

BROWN: This is a heck of a time for CNN to be rejiggering itself, when advertisers don't seem to want to put their advertisements on the air.

Mr. KAPLAN: Well, CNN has been in something of a revolving door turmoil for a while now, ever since the head of CNN/USA, Rick Kaplan, was ousted as a kind of prologue to a bit of a bloodbath there. Then the top executives at Turner, which is what CNN reports to, have their background in television programming. And so you have, for example, the hiring of an "NYPD Blue" actress without a high school diploma or any real journalism experience as an anchor on "CNN Headline News." So there are changes afoot which are, in many ways, driven by the concerns of the entertainment industry. The question is, if you do that, how far can you go and still be considered to be promoting serious journalism? So Walter Isaacson is the perfect man for that because he seems to bridge those two worlds so well.

BROWN: Nonetheless, it sort of makes you chuckle when you think how far we've come from the days of Ed Murrow and John Cameron Swayze.

Mr. KAPLAN: But people do forget that even in those days, the Tiffany Network, CBS, was also the place for "Petticoat Junction."

BROWN: On that note, Marty Kaplan, associate dean, USC Annenberg School for Communication, director of the Norman Lear Center, thanks so much for coming in.

Mr. KAPLAN: Thank you.

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