



*The Real Ted Baxter: The Rise
Of The Celebrity Anchorman*

Presentation, Terry Anzur
USC Department of Journalism

Respondent, Barry Glassner
USC Department of Sociology

Meeting Notes, Johanna Blakley
The Norman Lear Center



A Presentation Of The Celebrity, Politics & Public Life Series

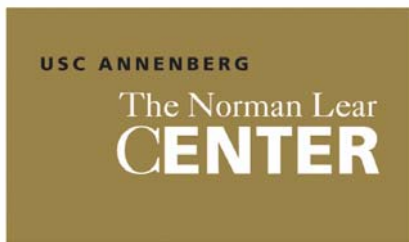
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USC ANNENBERG

The Norman Lear
CENTERTAINMENT
Exploring Implications of the Convergence of Entertainment, Commerce, and Society

The Norman Lear Center

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Celebrity, Politics & Public Life

Since Fall 2000, the [Norman Lear Center](#) has sponsored a popular faculty seminar series on [Celebrity, Politics & Public Life](#). [Faculty](#) and deans from over 20 departments convene three times each semester to develop an interdisciplinary analysis of political life in this country as it is shaped by popular culture. The project is co-directed by USC History Department Chair Steven J. Ross and Leo Braudy, Leo S. Bing Professor of English. Our topics have ranged from Elian Gonzales and Timothy McVeigh to Angela Davis, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Edward G. Robinson. The group includes professors and deans from anthropology, art history, cinema-television, theatre, ethnic studies, American studies, German, sociology, business, political science, economics, education, policy and planning, philosophy, gender studies, art history, psychology, communication, journalism, English, and history.



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Participants

Terry Anzur, Journalism
Warren Bennis, Business
Johanna Blakely, The Norman Lear Center
Leo Braudy, English
Stuart Batman
Mark Carpowich, Political Science
Laura Casteneda, Journalism
Geoff Cowan, Annenberg School for Communication
Ed Cray, Journalism
Barry Glassner, Sociology
Ed Guthman, Journalism
Tom Hollihan, Communication
Mark Kann, Political Science
Martin Kaplan, The Norman Lear Center
Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology
Richard Meyer, Art History
Larry Pryor, Journalism
David Roman, English
Ronnali Rosenfeld
Steven Ross, History
Joe Saltzman, Journalism
Marita Sturken, Communication
Nancy Troy, Art History

Background And Summary

Professor Anzur's paper is one of the chapters in her forthcoming book, *Strangers in the Living Room: How Local Television News Found Its Audience and Lost Its Soul*. Previous chapters dealt with the first live TV coverage of a breaking-news story, the first live coverage of a crime investigation in progress, Cold War-era coverage of atomic bomb detonations, and the 1958 invention of the news helicopter. This chapter looks at the evolution of the local TV news anchor while focusing on three men: George Putnam, a celebrity news anchor who introduced political commentary into his newscasts; Jerry Dunphy, another successful LA-based news anchor who resembles Ted Baxter; and Ted Baxter himself, the fictional anchor on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," who was modeled after Putnam and Dunphy.

Respondent, Barry Glassner, Professor of Sociology

Professor Glassner (and the rest of the discussion participants) responded to Professor Anzur's request for advice on adapting her chapter into a more traditional academic publication. Glassner felt she needed to consider answering the following questions, all of which became central issues in the discussion:

- Why did the consultants and the "bean counters" invade the newsroom in the '70s? What changes did they make, and why did they arrive then?
- Did Ted Baxter reflect real local anchormen, or did he become a model for what followed?

- What were the consequences of turning anchors into stars? Were there economic consequences, since stars were so expensive? Did news coverage take a second place to having a celebrity deliver it?
- The paper suggests that the network news anchor became "an icon of respectability, while the local broadcast news anchor came to be regarded as a blow-dried buffoon" (Anzur 3). Glassner found this too tidy a distinction since local stations have always supplied talent for networks, and the anchors who reach the national level do not really change. Is there a difference between the two?
- How and why has the anchorman turned into the traditionally machismo heterosexual man who is tall and well-built with a booming voice and a sports car? Why is this now the standard, and how is the anchor's authority rooted in this model?

Gender Issues in Local News

Professor Leo Braudy opened up the discussion with a comment on the historical context of the development of TV news: The authoritative male voice most likely arose from Edward R. Murrow and other celebrity correspondents who delivered the Movietone news during World War II. Braudy suggested that TV anchors may be pressured to do their time on the front in order to earn their stripes as real newsmen.

Professor Warren Bennis agreed that a signature Movietone voice was required for local anchormen, but he asked whether the tone of delivery gradually changed over time: is it now less certain of itself, more questioning?

Professor Richard Meyer focused instead on the anchorman as a relatively feminized figure. Unlike the smart, tough newsmen who work behind the scenes writing and producing TV news, the anchors are the pretty boys who are paid to look good. There's a certain mind vs. body split

that suggests that Ted Baxter isn't the real man in the "Mary Tyler Moore" newsroom, Lou and Murray are.

Professor Anzur gave us a little history of gender roles on local news. In the 1960s, the only women on local news shows were homemaker types like Sue Anne (Betty White) from "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." Stations had experimented with female anchors, but women viewers did not respond well because they were anxious about having their husbands stare at beautiful women every night on the evening news. The male icon still remains the core of the local news team, but now he is surrounded by a constantly changing group of good-looking women and minorities. The male anchor still has the voice of authority, but the news team has become something like a family, where the patriarchal anchor plays dad, the weatherman and the sports guy are the wacky kids, and the female anchor, who is often significantly younger than the male anchor, plays the role of the "hot thing on the side." Of course there are exceptions, though they often preserve the rule: Ann Bishop, a black woman anchor who dominated her Florida market for years, grew older and older, but her male sidekick was always handsome and young.

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The female anchor plays the role of the "hot thing on the side."
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Representations and Reality

Much of the discussion was animated by efforts to grapple with "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," and its role in both reflecting as well as shaping our ideas about local anchormen. Professor Braudy mentioned that the "blow-dried buffoon" anchorman seen regularly on TV was in the habit adopting a pose, a style of self-presentation that seemed tough, strong, and trustworthy, but boiled down to a mere parody of

the war correspondents he was attempting to emulate. Why are these guys kept on the air?

Professor Mark Kann was surprised by Braudy's suggestion that the general public believes that local anchors are idiots. Professor Anzur pointed out that Putnam and Dunphy's popularity suggests that viewers develop real affection for local newscasters along the lines of, "He's a buffoon, but he's our buffoon."

Professor Joe Saltzman, a veteran broadcast news writer who worked with Dunphy discussed his time behind the scenes. The newsroom writers knew that Dunphy was a performer, and a good one at that, but they hated him for his pomposity, his condescension, and his unwillingness to acknowledge how much he relied on them to do his "act." The writers saw him at his worst, yet the public saw him at his best. Saltzman suggested that the discussion participants were blurring together these two very different perspectives – newscasters like the Dunphy to whom the general public have a real emotional connection, and performer-newscasters like the Dunphy about whom Saltzman regaled the participants with stories. The insider perspective is the one that entered public consciousness once "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" went on the air.

Professor Richard Meyer seemed to agree: Local news wasn't always about buffoonery; viewers probably didn't think local anchors were idiots until "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" suggested they were so. The line between representation and reality became blurry as the "Moore Show" produced a certain attitude toward real news anchors. However, Professor Nancy Lutkehaus pointed out that Ted Baxter was not simply a representation, but a very successful parody – the Baxter character (like



Viewers develop real affection for local newscasters along the lines of, "He's a buffoon, but he's our buffoon."



many other satirical figures) resonated with viewers because his real-life models were ripe for parody. As Professor Anzur put it, "every town had its Ted."

Professor David Roman suggested that Anzur also investigate the history of the relationship between the sitcom and the newscast. How did these two genres arise? Both sitcoms and TV news evolved out of the radio format; did they borrow from each other as well? Leo Braudy suggested that we might see a similar trajectory in the evolution of the newsroom and the sitcom, which moved from "Father Knows Best" family-style comedies to the workplace comedy model of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

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The Baxter character resonated with viewers because his real-life models were ripe for parody. Every town had its Ted.
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The discussion participants further explored the issue of "representation vs. reality" by discussing how facts are molded into news broadcasts. Professor Marita Sturken argued that newscasts not only create "news," they construct audiences by reflecting and endorsing certain value systems in their reports. As Anzur pointed out, local news reporters often avoid interacting directly with real people with real troubles, choosing instead to stick with talking heads and approved officials who will deliver an uncomplicated sound-bite.

Several others, led by Professor Tom Hollihan, commented on the way that newscasters, anchors, politicians, spinmeisters and pundits have become indistinguishable from one another. The friendly patter and the sound-bites are typical of a communication style that has come to dominate public discourse. Professor Ed Guthman argued that this has been the case ever since the JFK/Nixon debate, when the new visual medium of TV demanded a slick, camera-friendly style that JFK had and Nixon did not.

Local News as a Celebrity-Centered Business

So who is to blame for the state of local news? Professor Martin Kaplan, a film industry veteran, reminded us that news is a market-driven business. News looks the way it does because it makes money – wouldn't it stand to reason that the public is ultimately responsible for the current state of broadcast television news?

Professor Sturken disagreed: She suggested that viewers are stuck with what's offered to them; they don't get to choose anchors. While Anzur pointed out that viewers responses to newscasts are taken very seriously by the networks, Glassner suggested that the public isn't necessarily getting what it wants because they're usually not asked what they'd really like to see. Surveys of viewers rarely include open-ended questions, and typically, respondents are forced to choose from multiple choices, making it virtually impossible to break away from the formula.

Professor Kaplan mentioned "The Washington Journal" on C-SPAN as an example of a news program that has gone out of its way to avoid the celebrity anchor. Feeling that there is something "mysteriously dangerous" about an anchor who becomes a well-known personality, the show does not allow the same person to host the show more than a few times.

Professor Larry Prior from the Online Journalism Program argued that local news has helped shape the format, tone, and expectations of online news. In his book *Blown to Bits*, Philip Evans argues that the most successful news Web sites appeal to audiences on a personal level. Matt Drudge and Jim Rome have become Web personalities, much like TV personalities. Viewers are attached to them and think of them as "navigators," leading them through the vast thicket of information on the Web.

National vs. Local TV News

Although Professor Anzur has proposed in her paper that national news is respected while local news is dismissed, she has not explained why or how this has become the case. In our discussion,

she mentioned that she found this a difficult issue to address, in part because it's nearly impossible to perform a comprehensive analysis of local news: while it's fairly easy to study network news (there's not much of it), there are over 1,600 local news stations across the US, some broadcasting five hours of news per day.

Both Glassner and Kann questioned the notion that national news is fundamentally different from local news. Professor Kann went on to say that local news has a much more powerful, immediate, and discernable effect on its viewers because it reports on issues that are much closer to home.

Suggestions for the Paper

- Examine what kinds of changes consultants made when they were hired to analyze local news stations.
- Concentrate more on historical context and less on personal interviews.
- Explain the political economy of celebrity, and describe how the content of news changed once anchors became stars.
- Identify when and how stars became the center of the news broadcast, rather than the news itself.
- Discuss the ways in which the audience is implicated in the anemic state of local news.
- Discuss stations that have avoided the formula. How many have succeeded, and how many have failed?
- Analyze local news as a genre, and compare it to the sitcom.

- Discuss gender roles on the local news.
- Refrain from discussing the national vs. local news argument if it won't be discussed in the paper.