

**THE BLOG**

# The Niceness of the Dinosaur

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By Marty Kaplan

09/29/2006 09:58 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

*CBS Public Eye asked me how I thought CBS News was doing. Here's what I told them:*

What would be lost if CBS brass pulled the plug on the "Evening News"?

Don't get me wrong. This isn't an obituary, and no one yet knows where the Niensens will settle. I'm asking a different question, about the core purpose of the program. What would be lost if it went dark?

Not revenue. There are other ways for CBS to win its share of the nearly \$500 million in ad income that the three networks split in that timeslot, some of them doubtless less costly than the "Evening News" budget.

Reputation? Sure, the Tiffany network might take a hit among elites, but Wall Street might actually cheer, and it's easy to imagine an abundance-of-platforms spin by Corporate that depicts outsourcing the "Evening News" content to the Web, cell phones and affiliate cutaways as a savvy 21st-century media play.

Jobs? Maybe. But that handwriting's been on the industry's wall for a while, and the era of one-company careers in America is long gone.

What's left - and it's the thing I want to wrestle with - is what makes the news business different from the widget business, and different even from the entertainment business. It's the reason journalism is protected by the Constitution. It's why there's any tension at all between the revenue motive and the public interest motive. It's why the FCC doesn't charge broadcasters for licenses. It's what accounts for the continuing vitality of ideas like "the Fourth Estate," "the public's right to know," and "speaking truth to power."

Bottom-line focused CEOs may dismiss "eat your broccoli" and "public trusteeship" as antiquated notions of news, but my guess is that most people who go into journalism as a profession still believe they're not just earning paychecks. They think that more-informed people make smarter choices. They hold that the better the news business is, the stronger democracy is. And by "better," they don't just mean financially healthy; they mean something consequential, something urgent.

You can't live at this moment in American history and not sense the high stakes of our times. Iraq, oil, genocide, deficits, fundamentalism, immigration, ignorance, loose nukes, global warming, culture wars, political paralysis: the list

goes on. It feels as though everything is on a hair trigger, nothing is under control. The world seems to have gone mad. Our collective hair is on fire. At such a moment, the task of journalism, arguably, is this: to help us be equal to the task of seeing our world soberly, resisting propaganda, and governing ourselves like a citizenry, not an audience.

So how good a job is the CBS “Evening News” doing at that task? I could ask the same question of the other two networks’ nightlies, and the answers would be surprisingly similar, but since it’s Katie I’ve been watching recently, let’s stick with CBS.

The word that comes to mind is nice. It’s what I imagine colleagues say to one another after the program has run. “Nice piece, Bill.” “Nice show, Katie.” And it’s true. The CBS “Evening News” is doing a nice, pretty good, sometimes admirably good job within the constraints of the genre and its news hole. And you can’t be grateful enough for its refusal to run with cable’s toxic JonBenet tide.

Sure, within the genre, there are plenty of choices I could argue with. The profusion of branded segments strikes me as over the top. I’ve had it with “get” journalism, like the Bush interview, which brings nothing but promotability to the table. The stunt-casting of Rush Limbaugh in the “Free Speech” segment immediately drained all credibility from its billing as a civil-discourse space. The hard/soft needle is too far toward heartwarming features and consumer service for my taste. I think the Iraq war, as a daily story, is under-covered. And don’t get me started on the cross-promoted “girly” (Katie’s word) Condi interview. The commenter on the “Couric & Co.” blog who called it a squandered opportunity more appropriate for a Tiger Beat magazine fluffing was right on the money.

But all that’s just fine-tuning, rod-twiddling. It buys into the underlying conventions of the institution. It doesn’t get at the essential exhaustion of the evening news format itself, the ill-suitedness of the dinosaur to its environment.

When Dan Rather stepped down, Les Moonves talked about boldly thinking outside the box; he raised revolutionary expectations, the possibility that way more was up for grabs than who would next occupy the anchor chair. It was both exhilarating (reinventing the evening news - how great for journalism!) and frightening (News Lite - how awful for journalism!). But today, when you get past the new face and new packaging, it turns out that there’s really nothing fundamentally different in the program’s DNA.

It’s still a rarity for more than a couple of hard news pieces a show to run much longer than a couple of minutes. Pieces are still constructed on a template that treats analysis and storytelling, intellectual depth and emotional depth, as combatants in a zero-sum game. Segments are still long on what, and short on why. Stories still juxtapose on-the-one-hand sound bites with on-the-other-hand clips, as though worshipping this strange god of “balance” were an acceptable alternative to truth-telling. Shows are still built like magazines. Instead of experimenting with the audience’s appetite for information, the evening news is still terrified by the audience’s putatively short attention span, its apparently insatiable demand for entertainment, its chilling threat to change the channel.

The CBS “Evening News” provided a particularly painful specimen of this fearfulness of its viewers in a Morley Safer obituary of Ann Richards. It was a lovely piece of journalism, except for one teensy melanoma. Richards gained national attention with her keynote speech to the 1988 Democratic Convention. She electrified that audience not only with her words, but also with her timing. “Poor George,” she said, and she paused, and the crowd loved how she held them in her hand. “He can’t help it,” she said, pausing again, and the convention exulted in the suspense before her punch line. “He was born with a silver foot in his mouth.” But before this classic clip aired on the CBS “Evening News,” someone in the chain of command seems to have decided that those exquisite pauses risked boring today’s television

audience, so those perfect beats of silence were excised from the video. To my ear, it was as though two half-measure rests had been eliminated from a piece of classical music.

I can imagine a hard-headed argument that the daily television market for high-end news and analysis is already saturated by “The News Hour with Jim Lehrer.” Besides, this case might continue, audiences who want that kind of “product” can also find it on public radio, in print, and via any online source they choose.

But this begs the question of whether the more than 25 million people who watch the networks’ evening news offerings would actually reward a program that spent the time and energy needed to explain something important but complicated,, to dispel a pervasive misunderstanding, to truth-squad pernicious disinformation, to focus public attention on an orphaned priority. Instead of being at the mercy of the White House’s decisions about what the theme of the week should be, why shouldn’t journalism use its own agenda-setting power to focus the country on things that people who aren’t running for office believe should count? Instead of putting out a nightly “Now ... This” magazine for people with ADD, why not truly tell us the overarching story of our time?

I respect and admire the people responsible for CBS “Evening News,” and I’m lucky to count some of them as friends. I understand the murderous competitive pressures they face, and I recognize the danger of alienating an existing audience with more than marginal change. Still, I wish these talented professionals had an opportunity to shake off the dead hand of the format - to show what a nightly program would look like if it broke new ground, took real risks, and rose both to the urgency of our age, and to the awesome capacity of the instrument in their hands.

Some might say that “corporate media” - the notorious MSM - has no interest in doing any of that. Even if it did, aren’t I asking way too much from a half-hour program? After all, it’s only the news. Yeah, and *Moby Dick* is only a novel. But while telling a great adventure story, Melville also managed to confront the nature of good and evil and the mysteries of existence. If ever a time in human history made it imperative that all of us address the abyss, it’s ours. Unfortunately, the niceness of the dinosaur is no match for the whiteness of the whale.

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