

“You News”

It's not your father's newscast anymore

*Call it “News Lite” or “News you can use”—by
whatever name, TV is racing for relevance.
But what gets lost along the way?*

Andie Tucher

Tom Brokaw comes to our telephone interview loaded for bear. To my boilerplate question—“How do you respond to the critics who say your newscast has become softer?”—he snaps back that many of the critics are also competitors with agendas of their own.

There is an elitist, myopic point of view about what these broadcasts have been and what they should be,” he says, “and I’m getting a little weary of it. There are no important stories we have missed.” After we hang up, he calls me back to say I had overstated the length of a piece I had mentioned as an example of a softer story—two minutes on the **Oregon** death-penalty laws for sheep-chasing dogs—and to remind me that critics have their own agendas.

Of course they do. Some of the criticism does come from rivals at CBS and ABC, who fear that NBC may be tak-

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ing over as the new top dog in the ratings war among the Big Three. From mid-December through mid-March, Brokaw’s half-hour evening broadcast consistently edged out barely but visibly the seven-year ratings leader, **ABC’s World News Tonight with Peter Jennings**, winning ten times, tying three, and placing second once in four-

teen weeks. (During the week ending March 7, for instance, NBC had an 8.8 rating, an 18 share, and an average of 12.01 million viewers; ABC came in at 8.5/17 with 11.16 million viewers; and CBS at 7.6/16 with 9.95 million viewers.)

And this advance comes at a time when the market for network evening news is inexorably shrinking throughout the 1970s, the three network newscasts together would routinely attract up to three-quarters of the viewing audience, but Nielsen reports that the combined audience share for the three has now slipped under 50 percent.

But edgy rivals aside, Brokaw’s slicked-up newscast would still be ripe for reassessment. While all the networks have been tinkering with their programs, **The Nightly News with Tom Brokaw** has given itself an inside-and-out makeover. NBC’s broadcast now sports a hipper, more high-tech feel, with a new video-wall backdrop,

Brokaw's face in a monitor mirroring Brokaw's face on Brokaw himself, Brokaw's face appearing suddenly on the giant video screen overlooking Times Square as he signs off. Where once the airtime was full of congressional wrangles and Middle East peace talks, now it's heavy with medical news and features from fly-over country. NBC has indeed gone softer and more user-friendly-populist," NBC executives like to call it-and Brokaw argues urgently that "what we're attempting to do is to cover the important news of the day and the news that is relevant to our viewers, and that news now has a much different woof and warp than it did twenty-five years ago."

Brokaw's competitors detect a betrayal of journalistic standards in all this. CBS anchor Dan Rather told *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in February that NBC was purveying 'News Lite.' In late March, when Paul Friedman, ABC's executive vice president for news, also took back his old job as the newscast's executive producer, he told *The Washington Post* that ABC would "cover serious news that the others can't manage."

But the old polarity between "soft" and "hard" news is itself something of a red herring. That's because NBC's *Nightly News* is not simply replacing coverage of world events with traditional soft features on heroic rescues or celebrity comebacks. NBC's producers, not unlike their fellows at the other networks, have discovered that, in addition to the old categories of the news you need and the news you want they can add a third type of newd that's flourishing in the '90s: news about you-news to use at your next doctor's visit, PTA meeting, or family dinner-table discussion.

The special problems of the network news in the '90s are legion. It's not just that many people are too busy, too cynical, or too turned off by public life to enjoy the evening-news habit. It's also that so many have been able to go elsewhere-and everywhere-for their news, from CNN to all-news radio to the Internet to local television news to tabloid TV to paid political ads, free political time, and even the late-night comedians, a favorite "news source" for a reported one-third of television-watchers under thirty, according to the Freedom Forum's Media Studies Center. "This is a fact of life," says ABC's Jennings. "I don't know how any evening news broadcast could now cast itself in such a way as to suddenly command the attention of vastly greater numbers of people."

What's more, the newscasts' core viewers tend to be older; The Pew Research Center reckons that almost two-thirds of people over sixty-four watch a network newscast "regularly," while less than a quarter of GenXers do. So "sooner or later the current news audience is all going to die," says Andrew Tyndall, editor of the *Tyndall Weekly*, which tracks and times the stories covered on the evening news. "And that's sooner rather than later."

In some fundamental ways the three newscasts haven't broken far from tradition-or from each other. All pay due attention to the obvious breaking stories: none could have been accused of ignoring either the verdict against O. J. Simpson or the death of Deng Xiaoping. After some initial foot-dragging all have recently been doing a "pretty good job" covering the hot political story of the day-the campaign fund-raising scandals-says Bill Hogan, director of investigative projects at The Center for Public Integrity in Washington, a watchdog group that monitors political spending.

AN AD IN THE NEW YORK TIMES TOUTED THE EVENING'S HOTTEST STORY= "MARRIAGE 'BOOT CAMP': COULD IT SAVE YOUR RELATIONSHIP?"

All include, as they always have, bright bits of the "news you want"—softer stories like the return of *Star Wars* and mushy little tributes to Valentine's Day. And all air a weekly slate of regular segments, ranging from "Your Money" and "Eye on America" to the often lightweight, even gossamer "Travels with Harry" on CBS (correspondent Harry Smith visits the stars of girls' basketball) and "Person of the Week" (people who have made positive social contributions) on ABC.

But these days, all three networks are paying as much attention to health problems as any scriptwriter for *E.R.* During just the first two and a half months of 1997 a steady channel surfer through the three broadcasts would

have been provided with "news you can use" about, among other topics, clot busters, osteoporosis, memory loss, macular degeneration, allergies, diabetes, male menopause, estrogen, blood transfusions, brain injuries, Alzheimer's, flu, antihistamines, panic attacks, arthritis, beta blockers, grapes as cancer fighters, uterine fibroids, obesity, drinking and driving, carphoning and driving, and mammograms. "The *New England Journal of Medicine* should be charging," says Sandy Socolow, a former executive producer for Walter Cronkite at CBS. "All three broadcasts are mesmerized by anything that involves the human body-and I'm not talking about sex."

What distinguishes NBC now is that both the gossamer and the useful often outweigh the grit. Its *Nightly News* tends to air fewer stories each evening than ABC or CBS, and far fewer of those come from the national capitals, whether Moscow, Belgrade, or, yes, Washington. More of them focus on trends, life-style and consumer issues, pop culture, and heartland America-and NBC isn't hiding its Lite under a bushel, either. An ad for the newscast appearing in *The New York Times* on March 28 touted what was obviously the evening's hottest story: "Marriage Boot Camp: Could it Save Your Relationship?" (The story was bumped by the news of the California cult suicide and actually aired April 4.)

Brokaw says he's simply "trying to be less of a wire service of the air?" because it's clear people have already heard the major news of the day by the time they click on the evening news. "I travel across this country a lot," he says, "and everywhere I go I hear what people are talking about and what interests them and what they are desperate to know about. And a whole lot of that has very little to do with what we would routinely put on the air ten-fifteen years ago."

Last year, according to Tyndall, viewers were apparently most desperate to know about the summer Olympics, which were broadcast by NBC Sports and which got more airtime on NBC News than any other story in 1996 (CBS's biggest story was TWA Flight 800 and ABC's was the Dole campaign, which included the entire primary season; see box). At the same time, NBC's attention to such hard-news topics as the presidential campaign and the Middle Eastern peace process was drastically lower than its competitors'.

And NBC has figured out the pleasures and profits of packaging. Tyndall

calculates that during the first two and a half months of 1997, NRC gave over a total of 351 minutes of its weeknight broadcasts to named feature segments, compared with 197 minutes on CBS and 185 on ABC. On any given evening as much as a third or more of the twenty-two-minute news hole might be devoted to such segments. Some of the features were shorter specials like "Sleepless in America," "Starting Over" (on keeping New Year's resolutions), "The Plane Truth" (airline safety), or "Going Home" (NRC newsmen return to their roots); others were established regulars like "In Their Own Words," "In Depth," "The Family," "The Fleecing of America" (governmental and institutional corruption and waste), "The American Dream," and "Norman Schwarzkopf's America."

All this translates into a "pot-pourri," as Brokaw would have it, a "rich mix of different kinds of stories." It's a mix, anyway. In the first months of 1997 NBC's "In Depth" segment, which usually runs some three or four minutes, examined everything from finding jobs for welfare recipients to the aging process. Under the other labels came a jumble of the informative, the you-focused, and the fluffy: reports on the meaning of daydreams, the genealogy craze, absent fathers, oversupply rip-offs at the Pentagon, no-fault divorce, Debbie Reynolds's comeback, getting out of debt, managing one's time, overcoming the fear of flying, coarse behavior among athletes, senior citizens on stage in Las Vegas, and how life has changed for women in Yankton, South Dakota (pop. 12,703), where Brokaw grew up.

The other networks have made changes that are similar, though somewhat smaller. As its own ratings trembled, ABC added a three-times-weekly "Solutions" segment in place of the eight-year-old "American Agenda," which had explored a wide range of issues in health, education, religion, and the environment. The new feature, introduced last September, also falls heavily into the utilitarian mold. It has focused on successful efforts around the country, many of them small in scale and private or local in scope, to address common problems and predicaments of daily life: how to cure chronic pain, find good day care, cut

neighborhood crime, motivate children to learn, reduce accidents among teenage drivers.

"Solutions" has come in for its share of criticism, too. After the segment looked at cures for snoring, the *Wall Street Journal* television critic, Dorothy Rabinowitz, wrote savagely of a broad-

an important and popular part of 'American Agenda.' "I think we're paying a little price because of what it's called," he says. The segment on snoring "would have been fine if it had been on Your Health." It's a national problem and a thing we spend money on, and if we'd done it on Your Health-well, Dorothy would just have waited for another one," Jennings continues, laughing.

"Our critics just don't like it because it's deemed to be pandering," he says. "But we get more response to 'Solutions' on the Internet than anything else we've ever done."

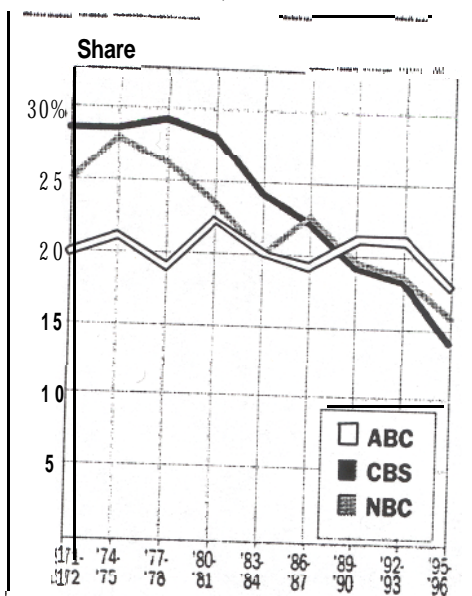
CBS's *Evening News*, meanwhile, after dominating the airwaves for years as the newscast of the "Tiffany" network, slid into third place in the ratings after Larry Tisch's cost-cutting years of the late '80s. Ratings don't always tell the whole story, of course. Some of *NBC Nightly News's* current strength may be attributable to "bounce" from the network's other successes—the thriving thrice-weekly newsmagazine *Date-line*, the slick new cable-and-online partner MSNBC, and the hot prime-time schedule. And CBS is quick to point out that some of its newscast's present weakness derives from intra-network "splat": CBS traded twenty-six affiliated stations with other networks after losing the broadcast rights to pro football, often ending up with weaker partner stations.

Dan Rather maintains that it's a "miracle" the *Evening News* is doing as well as it is in the face of the network's crumbled delivery system. "Because we have a reputation for being a hard-news outfit, we manage to stay in the hunt," he says. "I believe if we go the soft-news route we fall farther behind. I don't hear anybody among our viewers complaining that we run too much foreign

news. I do find viewers complaining when we run something they feel is a waste Of their time—like a soft feature."

CBS's lineup does indeed include noticeably more international stories than the other two newscasts. Last year the *Evening News* spent more

Nielsen's Numbers: How the Three Network Evening Newscasts Have Scored with U.S. Audiences, 1971-1996



Audience share, shown above, measures the percentage of the households actually watching television that was tuned to each program. Ratings, listed below, take potential viewers into account, showing the percentage of all households with television tuned to each program. Years run from September to April. In '95-'96 a single ratings point represented 959,000 U.S. households.

Rating											
ABC	9.6	11.1	9.9	12.6	11.1	10.7	11.0	11.3	6.6		
NBS	12.9	15.0	13.6	15.4	13.8	12.1	10.1	9.8	7.2		
				13.2	11.2	12.1	9.9	9.4	8.1		
1971-72	74-75	77-78	'80-'81	'83-'84	'86-'87	'89-'90	'92-'93	'95-'96			

cast "that has begun confusing itself with a social agency whose mission it is to advise citizens on all manner of personal concerns."

Jennings maintains that "Solutions" marks no radical departure for the broadcast; it's simply a way to emphasize a feature that had already been

time than either competitor on both **Bosnia** and the Middle Eastern conflict. It has aired a series of pieces by Sob Simon on the adjustments to black rule in South Africa, and no other network had a correspondent filing reports from Albania weeks before the country imploded in mid-March. But CBS, too, airs such small-focus features as "The Class of 2000" on teenagers' lives, and it has certainly done its bit for the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

As the newscasts continue to warm up and soften up, it's easy to romanticize the golden age when television news did, supposedly, have a soul. It's never been entirely, unrelentingly devoted to "hard" news: on a single randomly selected evening in 1971, CBS gave five minutes to Charles Kuralt's visit to a rally of An-stream-trailer fanciers and NBC's David Brinkley bade a leisurely welcome to spring.

And sometimes the evening news mistook ponderousness for heft. There was that hot night in August 1977 when ABC and NBC led their broadcasts with the death of Elvis Presley and the Tiffany network began with six minutes on an event it considered more newsworthy: negotiations over the Panama Canal Treaty. "A lot of the foreign coverage ten years ago was deathly dull," says Tyndall. "A lot of the vaunted foreign news coverage that NBC is *not* now doing used to be Marvin Kalb reading a press release from the secretary of state."

But critics point to other artifacts of the golden age that now seem just as quaint as an An-stream. "In the good old days you never even raised the issue of cost," says Marty Koughan, a sixteen-year veteran of CBS News who is now the executive producer for Mother Jones Television, "and if you raised the question of ratings you were mocked. At *CBS Reports* I worked on an hour on litigation in America—just try that today."

Sandy Socolow remembers when a sort of intellectual elitism was considered not just normal among newsmen, but healthy. "The mandate used to be to tell people what they needed to know—but they often don't know what they need to know until someone tells them," he says. "The newsmen's job is to hunch out what's important,

what's significant, and to *make* that interesting."

But that, says Brokaw, is exactly what's changed—the sense of what's really important to people—and a broadcast that doesn't notice isn't going to last long. "One of the things that I want not to happen is for us to all commit **suicide**," he says. Everything from education to the automobile business has also been changing, and "they could have been rigid and said 'I don't

Among *Newsweek's* top ten covers only number nine, on the crash of **TWA** Flight 800, was pegged to a breaking news story. Other top sellers featured John F. Kennedy's new wife ("Carolyn Style?", gay parenting, the cartoon character **Dilbert** on why 'Work is Hell," and 'The Biology of Beauty"

So, the argument goes, why should the newscasts be exempt from reorienting themselves as best they can, too? Why should the public require

TOP 10 EVENING-NEWS STORIES OF 1996

	Total Minutes	ABC	CBS	NBC
1. TWA Flight 800 crash	363	105	141	117
2. Bob Dole campaign	338	120	122	95
3. Yugoslavia war	301	117	134	49
4. O.J. Simpson trial	252	72	89	92
5. Israeli-palestinian conflict	244	88	104	52
6. Whiteater investigations	216	78	82	55
7. Atlanta Olympic games	207	39	28	140
8. ValuJet Flight 592 crash	184	48	61	74
9. GOP San Diego convention	178	62	68	49
10. Bull market	174	54	59	61

Source: ADT Research/Andrew Tyndall.
Subtotals may not add up due to rounding.

MOFFETT CECIL

want to be demeaning to the institution, and they'd have gotten left behind."

Brokaw could have added the rest of the press to his list of evolving institutions, too, as it grapples with the glut of information and what surveys suggest is an unshakable resistance among most of the audience to serious, "hard" news. The print press, long since displaced as the medium of first resort by the evening newscasts and more recently by the omnipresent CNN and C-SPAN, has for years been adapting by substituting service stories, life-style features, and analysis for the urgent scoop. The "newspaper of record," *The New York Times*, now puts on its front page leisurely stories about the plight of bored wealthy Russian wives or the overelaborate caution labels on, for instance, children's Batman capes. The muckraking bimonthly *Mother Jones* recently started a health column. And the best-selling issue on domestic newsstands for both *Time* and *Newsweek* in 1996 was devoted to new interpretations of the life of Jesus.

this one medium to be stuck with playing Norma Desmond when everyone else gets to be Madonna?

One reason is precisely that: everyone else is doing it. If the goal is really to give people news they haven't already heard, it's hard to believe that without NBC on the case, viewers would never find out that families work better if Dad's around or that not getting a good night's sleep can be bad for your health. The more any broadcast strives to be "not your father's evening news," the more indistinguishable it is from the "everything else" that is its most feared **competition**—the local television news, the tabloid shows and newsmagazines, the slick print magazines, Oprah, even the late-night comedians.

Yet there's a larger question at stake here, too, one that goes well beyond any critique rooted in Tyndall's numbers of minutes devoted to this or that. It's a question of the mood, the tone, the underlying message of the stories that do make air—and of the ones that don't. How long can an eve-

ning news program emphasize the fulfillment of viewers' needs, work to provide exactly what they are "desperate" to hear—and continue to function as a *national* newscast at all?

No one will argue that news about helping your child do better in school is less worthy on some cosmic scale than yet more news about Bosnia, or that it's not a journalist's business to give your sister the information she needs to discover her breast cancer early. If the evening news once had room for all those Panama Canal negotiations, it should certainly be able to find some place for stories of more immediate human interest.

Nor will anyone contend that the newscasts have entirely given up on stories that connect viewers to a larger world than their own home or community, introducing them to issues they didn't necessarily know they didn't know about. Everything from ABC's backgrounder on a Supreme Court religious-freedom case involving the rebuilding of a church, to CBS's exploration of China's intentions in Hong Kong, to NBC's look at the debate over executing a mentally ill criminal in Texas has managed to do that.

But the danger is very real now that as any national newscast edges closer in tone and subject to local-news and newsmagazine programs, it will make more of its journalistic decisions and consume more of its twenty-two minutes based on local-news and newsmagazine standards. That it will choose personal relevance instead of national importance, it will prefer soft soap to hard truths, and, given a choice between raising ratings and raising hell, it will look up and not down.

It's already happening. Take foreign news. From January 1 to mid-March, the civil war in Zaire, the second largest country in sub-Saharan Africa, was almost entirely off the map for every one of the network newscasts. And on March 13, after marine helicopters moved in to evacuate several hundred Americans from Albania, Brokaw led his broadcast with a dramatic description of the "meltdown" in a country whose name had first been breathed on the weeknight newscast just the previous evening. The chaotic little country had, apparently, been of no in-

terest whatsoever without an American angle.

While some of this inattention to foreign news obviously reflects the end of cold-war tensions, much of it is also clearly due to fear—of low ratings and high cost. Brokaw, while arguing that NBC has not missed a major foreign story, also bluntly points out that when

WHY SHOULD THE PUBLIC REQUIRE THE EVENING NEWS TO BE STUCK WITH PLAYING NORMA DESMOND WHEN EVERYONE ELSE GETS TO BE MADONNA?

Bryant Gumbel took *Today* to black Africa and did "a really distinguished piece of work," it got "almost no ratings." In consequence, he says, "I knew immediately it would be harder for us to go back to Africa ourselves."

Or consider political news. For all their emphasis on clot busters and mammograms, all three newscasts have just about forgotten an entire class of sick people whose plight was a hot topic four years ago when Clinton proposed his health-care reform measures—those who are uninsured.

Even the biggest stories are often smaller than they used to be. In June 1991 ABC's *World News Tonight* went on the air with a huge project: every night for two weeks it devoted at least one significant segment to examining child poverty—its causes, consequences, and possible remedies. Throughout the late '80s NBC devoted its "Special Segment," sometimes lasting as long as five or six minutes, to topics like the loss of the rain forests, racism in the military, and—for two weeks—a look at the lives of Vietnamese citizens and Vietnam veterans a decade after the fall of Saigon.

But ABC's big project this spring resonated much differently. Throughout the entire month of March *World News Tonight* joined with ABC's entertainment and sports divisions to focus on one question: how parents can talk to children about drugs. It is a topic of

great concern, of course, but one with a very circumscribed focus—on *you*, *your* family, *your* children, not someone else's who may be in need. And while Brokaw defends NBC's regular "Fleeing of America" segment as "an investigative piece in the richest old mainline tradition of journalism," its title betrays its preoccupation with investigating only a pinched and personal victimology: how the government is out to cheat *you*.

Like everything else, the evening news goes through cycles and fashions, and this trend, too, will doubtless cycle on. "The evening news is not this font of perceived wisdom that our critics say we think we are," says Jennings. "We are another institution on the national playing field and we respond in some considerable measure to how the really powerful institutions in the country operate—the executive branch, the Congress, the Pentagon, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in the old days the CIA.

"There are tons of people out there," Jennings goes on, "who say 'Well, just do this, do that, you should be doing this, you shouldn't be doing that.' But journalism is nothing if not a rolling experiment. We get up every day trying to figure out what is relevant to people in this country, and we very often don't know the answer in any immediate sense."

In fact the trend toward the personalizing and softening of news is very much a response to—if not an outright imitation of—the way other "really powerful institutions in the country" have themselves been working to woo an alienated and restive public.

Between the politicians who won in the last election and the warmed-up segments of the evening news, the parallels are particularly striking. Like the journalists, the politicians have focused on small, personalized promises of a better life, not for your country, but for you and your family: Airplane flights without butterflies! Time off from work for PTA meetings! A good night's sleep for all!

Both talk in the cadences of a manufactured populism that replaces the inspiring tones of leadership with a comforting patois of service and infotainment. Politicians and television journalists alike want us to know they are just folks like us, just folks who understand our concerns, just folks who feel our pain, just folks who know what we're desperate to hear.

And what might get enough votes—or ratings points—to win.