

What's Happening to TV Journalism?

Washington Week's long-time moderator says that the relentless pursuit of ratings and profits has led to a decline in standards. **By Paul Duke**

One night in February 1967 four established Washington reporters sat down around a table in a ramshackle Howard University broadcasting studio and began talking about the stories they had been covering. Thus was born *Washington Week in Review*, the granddaddy of television's informal, conversational news discussion programs.

From that inauspicious beginning on local station WETA, *Washington Week* soon took root as one of the capital's preeminent broadcasting institutions. It was the first program to be fed nationwide to the fledgling Public Broadcasting Service in 1969 and remains a mainstay on 334 PBS stations.

While change is the endemic rule of television, *Washington Week* has been a resolute apostle for the status quo. The program's kinder, gentler format has been refined and tweaked a bit over the decades, but it has steadfastly held to its original design of conveying the important news of the week through the eyes of the journalists who have been reporting that news.

Hence, while much of television news has ventured forth in questionable new directions in recent years, *Washington Week* still clings to the old fashioned notion that a journalist's primary responsibility is to truth telling. In other words, those who appear on the Friday night program are expected to tell the audience what they know, not what they think – to talk about what has happened, not what may happen.

This distinction is increasingly a rarity in television news, where the relentless pursuit of ratings and profits has led to a decline in traditional standards. It explains why so many critics condemn what they see as a steady drift downward into tasteless and undistinguished mediocrity.

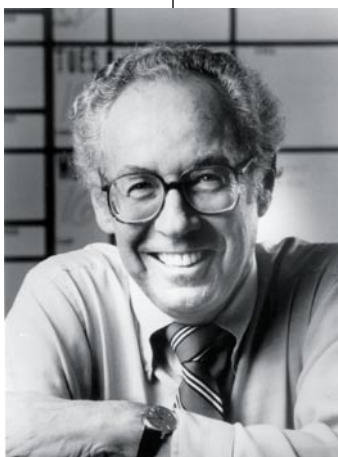
Count me among the critics. As Yogi Berra once famously said (supposedly), you can observe a lot by watching – and much of what I see on the screen these days corresponds to little more than junk journalism. The deterioration is pretty much across the spectrum from local to national broadcasting, but is perhaps most evident in some of the programming on the cable-news channels.

It is here that one finds so much superficial reporting, so much dwelling on inconsequential and frivolous stories, so much instant analysis that is instant baloney and so many quasi-journalists posing as real journalists. It brings to mind the *New Yorker* cartoon showing a man telling a woman at a party that "I'm not really a journalist. I just play one on the evening news."

In this new show-biz realm it is hardly surprising that entertainment values often trump news values. Most memorable, of course, is the maniacal coverage of the celebrated O.J. Simpson murder case, which launched a tidal wave of crime and scandal stories. In this dumbing-down culture, the titillation machines are powered by the sensational and salacious, a reality emphasized by comedian Bill Maher when he irreverently asked: "Why should anyone care about Scott Peterson?"

While Iraq and the war on terrorism have been ongoing headline stories, other significant national and world developments are often dismissed with scant attention, if that.

Talk shows dominate in the cable kingdom where the modus operandi tends less toward information than gossip, speculation and opinion. Politics is trivialized as a contact sport akin to



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wrestling or a Nascar race, the preoccupation primarily on winners and losers, who's up and who's down. Nothing illustrated this more than the vacuous manner in which so much of the 2004 election campaign was covered.

More than ever, the cable landscape is populated with confrontational gabfests, zealous ideologues

oozing with know-it-all righteousness about the latest controversies of the day. These clashes may be an engaging sideshow for political junkies but for those seeking intelligent answers the heat invariably exceeds the light.

Other problems exist at the major commercial networks where serious journalism is sometimes seen as a burden in the never-ending quest for

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bigger audiences. The explosion in corporate mergers has created a new age of media conglomerates more dedicated to the bottom line. As Frank Rich wrote in *The New York Times*, "a network news division is just another entertainment profit entry, like theme parks and logo-laden tchotchkes, in a megacorporation."

The hard-hitting documentary

is a vanished species as front-office executives turn more and more to lower-denominator, fluffier features and tabloid-type potboilers. Most of the prime-time news magazines are little more than video versions of the old Hollywood movie magazines or *The Police Gazette*, leaning heavily on celebrity interviews and sob stories. As Bill Moyers put it: “They’re all designed to get people to cry about lost children.”

Furthermore, the network product is cheapened by an endless barrage of promotion and puffery. The December changing of the NBC *Nightly News* anchor guard from Tom Brokaw to Brian Williams was shamelessly milked as a transcendent broadcasting milestone. As Alessandra Stanley lamented in a *New York Times* review: “Mr. Williams’ ascension was festooned with all the hoopla of a White House wedding — or funeral.” The excessive pomp, she asserted, was regrettable because Brokaw and Williams are “much more appealing than the maudlin NBC promos that flooded the airwaves would ever suggest.” But bathos has become the network way. Last spring NBC’s *Dateline* devoted an entire hour to hyping the game show hit *The Apprentice* as that program’s season’s finale approached. As if that were not enough, two nights later *Dateline* profiled *Apprentice* host Donald Trump. Still later it was back shilling for the farewell editions of NBC’s *Frasier* and *Friends*. On their morning news shows, the networks endlessly sing the praises of their evening programming

fare, sometimes doing news stories with a tie-in. The *CBS Early Show* has repeatedly done segments relating to the wildly successful *Survivor* series.

Sad to say, this faddish blurring of fact and fiction seems here to stay amid television’s more competitive atmosphere. Translated, it means that in some very basic ways the medium that Edward R. Murrow once exalted as the world’s biggest classroom is defaulting on its heralded mission to inform and enlighten.

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This is not to say that all the news about television news is bad news. In fact, many professionals in the business deplore the trend away from the best traditions of American journalism. Some prominent anchors and correspondents are speaking out. Barbara Walters, who is stepping down as co-anchor of ABC’s *20/20* recently voiced concern about the growing pressures to attract younger audiences more attuned to the jazzier new styles.

The rising specialization in cable offerings has produced a welcome smorgasbord of niche programming in history, sports, finance, weather and arts programming. BBC’s World Service is now in the game with its extensive global coverage. Three C-Span channels have become a national treasure with their unfiltered spotlight on Congress and federal goings-on. And for all of their shortcomings, the

cable systems and the networks usually do a masterful job in mobilizing for the occasional blockbuster story, the recent Indian Ocean tsunami catastrophe being a classic case. Likewise, the bloody scenes of Iraq combat have shattered any lingering illusions about the savagery of war.

Public broadcasting continues to make a considerable contribution, although it, too, has begun to shade its principles by bowing to political pressure for a more conservative flavoring. *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* still packages the nightly news with a blend of straightforward reporting and incisive commentary. Ken Burns and *Frontline* have commendably stepped into the documentary breach. And *Washington Week* adheres faithfully to its formula of facts first and analysis based on those facts.

It was that formula that quickly earned the program something of a cult following. I discovered this remarkable devotion when I left NBC News for PBS in 1974 and took command of *Washington Week*. On a trip back to my home town of Richmond, Virginia, for a local broadcasting reception, a spunky little gray haired woman greeted me with the disclosure that she had taken a bus 50 miles into town to shake my hand because “y’all tell it like it is.”

That calling card of truth was laid down by the program’s original reporting trio of Peter Lisagor of the *Chicago Daily News*, Charles Corddry of the *Baltimore Sun* and Neil MacNeil of *Time* magazine. The star was Lisagor, a charismatic White House reporter who had an impish eagle eye for getting to the heart of matters. As one critic said, Peter had the knack for telling what was going on inside the presidential

mansion “as if he had the keys to all the rooms.” He loved to pinprick stuffed shirts and his wit was captivatingly pungent. Once, when Gerald Ford was president, I asked him to compare Press Secretary Ron Nessen with Richard Nixon’s spokesman Ron Ziegler. “Two Rons don’t necessarily make a right,” he shot back as we all burst into laughter.

Lisagor’s courageous reporting on the Watergate scandal figured prominently in a 1972 Washington Week crisis. Some of President Nixon’s advisors didn’t take kindly to Peter’s weekly thrusts and began pushing for a cutoff in federal funding for PBS public affairs programming. With the future in doubt, producer Lincoln Furber took to the air to warn viewers that *Washington Week*’s days might be numbered. The response was incredible – 15,000 letters of protest, many enclosing unsolicited donations to keep the program going. The ensuing political storm prompted the White House to quietly back off.

Lisagor’s death from lung cancer in 1976 brought a spontaneous outpouring of tributes from across the country. A woman in Huntington Beach., Calif., wrote: “Except for President Kennedy, I had never wept upon hearing of the death of a public figure, but I did tonight when I heard you say Peter had died.”

The passing of the legendary Lisagor persuaded me to modify the program’s format by building a new and enlarged team of reporters. As it was, some critics were suggesting that we were too stuck in our old three-man ways – that sometimes, as one of them complained, we were just “dull, dull, dull.” So our first team lineup slowly began to include other heavy hitters from the capital’s 5,500-member press corps, among them three Pulitzer

Prize winners – Haynes Johnson of the *Washington Post*, Jack Nelson of the *Los Angeles Times* and Hedrick Smith of *The New York Times*. Other additions followed: Charles McDowell of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Albert Hunt of the *Wall Street Journal*, Georgie Anne Geyer of Universal Press Syndicate, Gloria Borger and Steven Roberts of *U.S. News & World Report* and Howard Fineman of *Newsweek*.

By the early 1980s our audience had reached four million and the program was firmly established as a solid member of the PBS family. The critics were taking greater notice as well. Writing in the *Denver Post*, Barbara Ryan said the show was presented in “an atmosphere of cheerful bluntness that bears about as much resemblance to the decorous quizzing on NBC’s *Meet the Press* and CBS’s *Face the Nation* as *Rolling Stone* to Mozart.” Randall Roe of the *New York Daily News* called it a comforting departure from the customary offerings of “superhype and bionic anchormen.” Awards began piling up, too, including the prestigious duPont-Columbia prize for outstanding journalistic achievement.

A number of factors figured in this success – the chummy camaraderie around the table, the relaxed civility, the intimate glimpses of behind-the-scenes capital life. Many people looked upon us as old friends who dropped in once a week to help them catch up on the big doings. “It is the next best thing to inviting people in for interesting conversation,” observed a Platte, South Dakota, viewer.

But credibility was the essential ingredient, particularly with the politicians and power brokers of Washington who had come to regard

the program as a must-see. Senate Democratic Leader Robert Byrd held up an elegant dinner party because, as he told the hostess, “I can’t afford to miss my favorite news program.” It was a sentiment echoed by thousands of other loyal viewers who described planning their Friday evenings around the program, declining social engagements, taking telephones off the hook, meeting in groups to watch together. A Boston fan delayed her trip to the hospital to give birth until our weekly stint was finished. It was all rather amazing – and humbling.

Much as we reveled in all this glory, the adulation was never unanimous. Some letter writers cited *Washington Week* in agreeing with Vice President Spiro Agnew’s claim that the press was dominated by “nattering nabobs of negativism.” A Kalamazoo, Michigan, man upbraided us as the voices of gloom and doom, wondering “if the suicide rate is higher on Friday nights after your program.”

The most passionate protesters were those who charged that we were politically biased. Democrats and Republicans alike poured on the vitriol if they felt our reporting was skewed against their favorites. A Goldsboro, North Carolina, man, objecting to a report about missteps by Ronald Reagan’s White House, confided: “As I approach my 81st birthday, watching this program could be injurious to my health, especially my blood pressure, but like so many my age I live dangerously these days.” Nor did the newer team sway all of the critics, one writing that it took him three martinis to get through our sober-sided discussions. Another compared our sessions “to appliance dealers trying to figure out

why refrigerators weren't selling." But what really hurt was a study in one California school district that seemed to suggest we were offering little more than comic book wisdom – that the few students who watched the program registered lower reading scores than those who did not.

Then there were the grammarians. The slightest slip of the lip provoked a deluge of corrective mail. Once, after referring to an old cliché, I was chided by a Concord, New Hampshire woman: "Please, Mr. Duke, give us a new cliché sometime." A New Rochelle, New York, man berated Hedrick Smith for excessive use of the phrase "a number of . . ." in his sentences. He argued with unassailable gusto that the Bible did not spell out "a number of" commandments, that Lincoln's Gettysburg address never referred to "a number of" years ago and that Columbus did not sail west in "a number of" ships.

Such fervor reflected the intense personal interest in the program and its participants. Nothing went unnoticed. A Boise, Idaho, man launched a crusade for better studio lighting, saying it was especially unkind to Jack Nelson by making it appear he was "aging fast." After a friendly fly swooped down on a reporter's nose one night, four flyswatters arrived in the next week's mail.

Besides these kind-hearted concerns, we bathed in the ego-boosting byproduct of instant recognition in our travels. A Canadian couple (yes, there were fans



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north of the border, too) named a child after Charlie Corddry. We were featured and satirized in cartoons, comic strips and on *Saturday Night Live*. As my 20-year reign at head of the table was drawing to a close in 1994, a Huntington, West Virginia, man sent along a goodbye message that he had

taped every show for 16 consecutive years.

With Gwen Ifill as the current moderator, *Washington Week* still holds forth at the same old Friday night stand. Its third-generation roster of reporters still features the capital's best and brightest, among them Martha Raddatz of ABC News, Doyle McManus of the *Los Angeles Times* and Michael Duffy of *Time*. And, as a senior broadcasting citizen, it still proudly pursues its time-honored mission of countering Mark Twain's contention that ordinary mortals could never understand what's going on in the government. The testament of a Fresno, California, woman may have put it best when she said: "Thank goodness there's something that works in Washington without people yelling at each other."

Paul Duke is a veteran Washington journalist. He has reported on American politics for the Associated Press, *The Wall Street Journal* and NBC News. Now retired, he was moderator of *Washington Week in Review* for 20 years. He has also produced several prize-winning documentaries and recently received the John Chancellor Award for lifetime journalism achievement.