

Ted Koppel is Still Relevant

He reveals his convictions about TV journalism and its future on the Internet. | **By Morton Silverstein**

Last year at this time *Television Quarterly* ran the first part of an interview I conducted with Ted Koppel, then the host of ABC News *Nightline* (as he would be for 25 years). Our lead line then was “There is one thing unmistakably clear about Ted Koppel. He does not suffer fools gladly.”

The aphorism still obtains.

Our interview began with a dust-up – ABC seeking to replace *Nightline* with an entertainment show headed by David Letterman, if he could be lured from CBS. Exacerbating this was an unnamed ABC executive who proclaimed: “The relevancy of *Nightline* just is not there anymore.”

With remarkable civility, Koppel responded with the *New York Times* Op-Ed page as his proscenium, and further articulated in our interview: “I said that I had no illusions, that I knew that I was not working for a charitable organization. It’s a business. They believed they could make a great deal more by bringing David Letterman over. But I said it was gratuitous for that still unnamed executive to say what he or she did. And that got my Irish up. So I felt it was important that if the Letterman thing did not go

through, and if *Nightline* was to stay on ABC, very senior representatives of this organization should publicly express what I hoped would be their real view about *Nightline*. Which they did.”

We asked: Where do you stand right now? Is there a new contract, which would satisfy you temporarily?

Koppel: Yes. It satisfied me... our life span could have been as brief as a few more weeks. Now we have a guarantee of significantly longer than that.

Us: How much longer?

Koppel: (laughing) None of your business.

But soon enough, it would be everyone’s business.

“Preeminent newsman Ted Koppel startled industry executives last week by jumping to a network not known for news,” announced *Broadcasting & Cable* magazine last January. “The venerated ABC *Nightline* ex-anchor, his producer/sidekick Tom Bettag and eight former ABC producers will develop at least six specials a year for Discovery on important issues but not

necessarily topics that broadcast or even cable news operations care much about." *B&C* quoted Koppel as saying that "cable news is in a desperate race to be first with the obvious."

When asked what he might get out of Discovery that he wouldn't get elsewhere, he answered: "An environment that is conducive to doing the kind of programming that we want to do...The great joy of Discovery is that we can expand beyond even what we have done in the past."

And what of the past? The legacy that Ted Koppel's *Nightline* left?

Following are some of the most memorable moments of a series—and philosophies about broadcast journalism—that made late-night network television eminently watchable.

Mort Silverstein: I'd like your take on some interview excerpts which we plan to roll from *Nightline*. This is post the crisis. The Hostage Crisis was always the lead story, but you had other stories, is that correct?

Ted Koppel: It was not always the lead story. I mean, we did, for a number of months thereafter, always give some kind of an Iran update.

But after a number of months, we just started doing programs on other subjects. There simply wasn't anything to report. We had no sense of what was happening inside the Embassy. It was still the Carter Administration. It was the last thing in the world they wanted to talk about anymore. They had been very eager to talk about it during the first few days, but after that, no. So there were many times when we did

programs that had nothing whatsoever to do with Iran.

MS: But I recall viewers were really dependent upon you and *Nightline* to tell them what was going on with the Crisis.

TK: Well, that was just before CNN began. I think CNN went on the air in 1980. So back then, there was no 24-hour cable news. And if people wanted to know what was happening between the hours that the evening news broadcasts went off the air and the time that we came on at 11:30, we were it.

MS: For the benefit of a much younger generation that hasn't caught up with this aspect of history yet, the Crisis ended when?

TK: January 20th, 1980. At noon, precisely, because the Iranians were quite literally waiting. They did not want to release the hostages to Jimmy Carter. And they waited until the very moment that Ronald Reagan took the oath of office. And there had to have been someone, in Washington or in the United States, on a cell phone or on a regular phone, to Tehran, saying ok; he's not the president anymore. Reagan's in; Carter's out. And at that moment, they allowed the plane with the hostages to take off.

MS: Some post-hostage-crisis interviews. Gary Hart; December 15th, '87. You asked him about his reputed affairs while married or separated, and he finished by in effect saying that such a question, about his faithfulness, might bring down the Republic.



Ted Koppel, anchor of the ABC News program *Nightline*.

TK: He just says that he hopes that a question like that will never have to be asked again.

MS: He was pretty ticked off. Or he pretended to be.

TK: I don't think he was pretending. I think he probably was ticked off. But he certainly wasn't surprised, because we had engaged in lengthy telephone negotiations about this.

What is forgotten now is that Gary Hart had previously had a reputation of being a ladies man. And when he decided to run for the presidency in that year, his staff, who were people who were going to be on his campaign staff, had said to him, look, if you're gonna run for president, you've gotta promise us that there isn't gonna be any of that. And he had made that promise. The subject had come up at a press

conference: was he, in fact, still engaging in that kind of behavior? He issued a challenge to the press. He said, no, I'm not. But, you know, you can follow me if you want to. I guess assuming that nobody ever would. But one reporter, I think for the *Miami Herald*, took him up on it. Did follow him. Followed him to the apartment of someone who was not his wife. Saw him go in there late in the evening and not emerge until very early in the morning. And so the subject was suddenly out there. It was out there, in large measure, because he had issued the challenge.

But these were also different times. The question is frequently raised, why didn't you guys in the press do the same thing with Jack Kennedy there, who was probably just as randy in his way as either Gary Hart or Bill Clinton? I wouldn't describe FDR as having being randy; I mean, he had had an affair.

But these guys, you know, they had multiple relationships. And in the wake of Vietnam and in the wake of Watergate, and in the wake of many of the things that had happened in the late '60s, there simply was no longer the willingness to give people the kind of leeway that had been given to them in the '40s or '50s or even the early '60s. And Gary Hart was the first victim of that. But he was a victim of his own design. And of his own challenge. It certainly finished his political career.

MS: On *Nightline* also were Jim and Tammy Bakker, accused, among other things, of misappropriating their televangelism empire funds for personal use. I think "scoundrels."

TK: Oh, sure. They were scoundrels. They were people who are just ordinary thieves. And then there are thieves who take advantage of religion and people's charitable inclinations. And the Bakkers did both. It's one thing to steal money that isn't yours. It's something else to take it from people, many of whom didn't have a whole lot of money themselves, but were sending money in to the PTL, as it was then known.

MS: Praise The Lord.

TK: Praise The Lord. But in any event, the money was supposed to go to help poor people; people who were in desperate need. Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker were many things, but they were not in desperate need. And they used people's faith, and they used people's sense of charity, to line their own pockets. So I think "scoundrel" is probably a rather gentle term to use.



A Serb in Croatia.

MS: Talk about Kosovo.

TK: What had happened was, this was in a square behind police headquarters in [Prishtina]. And we had just spent the morning going through police headquarters, which by then had been abandoned, and the police had set fire to many of the documents that were in there. And there was a small, open-air café in the square behind the, behind the police headquarters. And there were a couple of customers sitting there. And so I asked them if they would mind if I sat down and talked to them. And they were both Serbs. And I asked them about what had happened to the Kosovar Albanians. And one man in particular [see photo above] kept insisting to me that the Albanians, the Kosovar Albanians, the ethnic Albanians, who were the victims of a number of atrocities, and indeed I had just come the day before from seeing a mass grave opened up, in which there had been the bodies of women and children. And they were still insisting that if anything, the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo got better treatment than the Serbs did. And the argument that this man was making was that if indeed a Serb as much as slapped an Albanian in

the face, that he, the Serb, would end up in prison.

And so I said, bullshit. And what had been going through my mind at that point was, if I'd been sitting in Berlin in 1945, behind Gestapo headquarters, and if a German then had told me the same thing about some of the, the victims of Nazis and who had ended up in the concentration camps and had told me that no, in point of fact, German Jews were treated better, that just to say, gee, I'm not sure that's accurate, didn't seem quite strong enough. Bullshit seemed like the appropriate expression, and I used it, and my producer and I talked about whether we should put it on the air that night, and both felt it was just the right word.

THE AL CAMPANIS INTERVIEW

MS: On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Jackie Robinson's debut in Major League Baseball, you interviewed Al Campanis, Los Angeles Dodger vice-president and director of player personnel. Following Roger Kahn, author of *The Boys of Summer*, you asked Campanis why there were no black managers, no black general managers, no black owners, in Major League Baseball. Campanis responded, "I don't believe it's prejudice. I truly believe that they [African Americans] may not have some of the necessities to be, let's say, a field manager or perhaps a general manager." What was your reaction when you heard that key word "necessities"?

TK: There's something else that you need to understand: we had invited Al Campanis on the program because

in the late '40s, early '50s, he had been Jackie Robinson's roommate. We brought him on because that took, in those days, for a white ballplayer to room with a black ballplayer, an act of courage. It was an act of great decency. So my first reaction was just one of absolute shock. And Al Campanis and I met years later. He heard that I was in Los Angeles and he called me at the hotel and asked if I'd meet him for a cup of coffee, and I said sure. I mean, I came down fairly hard on him after that statement, and, and tried to give him actually two or three chances to redeem himself but he kept digging himself in deeper and deeper...

Part of the problem was that he was sitting at home plate; it was just after a night game. He had one of these earpieces and he couldn't see me at the time; he was a man already in his seventies then. But it was also a function, I think, of his generation. That to talk that way would have been perfectly acceptable. In the locker room. In the local pub. In the 1950s. Or even into the '60s and '70s. It wasn't appropriate anymore in 1987. And we could very easily have had some other official of the Los Angeles club on, who would have been smarter, smoother, or would have known enough not to say that. I mean, I felt kind of sorry for Al Campanis, because as I say, fundamentally, I think, he was a very decent man. And at the time when it meant the most, he was there. And he, quite literally and figuratively, stood up at the plate. And was there to be a friend as well as a teammate to Jackie Robinson. But I just couldn't let him say those things and not challenge him. And the end result was that a day or two later he was fired.

MS: Wasn't there a happier ending after that?

TK: Harry Edwards, an African-American sociologist, called Al Campanis and asked him if he would come to work with him, and they actually did some very useful work together, and Campanis was very proud of that.

MS: Campanis apparently was seeking...to put the question back on your desk when he asked "how many black anchormen do you have?" And you answered, "fortunately, there are a few black anchormen. But if you want me to tell you why there aren't any black executives, I'm not gonna tell you it's 'cause the blacks aren't intelligent enough. I'm going to tell you it's because whites have been running the establishment of broadcasting just as long as they've been running the establishment of baseball, for too long. And seem to be reluctant to give up power."

THE STATE OF BROADCAST JOURNALISM TODAY

MS: At Harvard's Kennedy School of Government a couple of years ago, you answered questions from students and the public about the integrity of the news product. And you said, "I frequently argue that television journalism today," – this is two years back – "and print journalism today is better than it's ever been. Simultaneously, unfortunately, it's also worse than it has ever been. We have more good journalism and more bad journalism coexisting and

frequently the bad drives out the good." How do you define bad and how do you define good?

TK: Well, I think, I think television journalism has a propensity to get into a competition to be first with the obvious. I think also in the wake of *60 Minutes* demonstrating that a television news program can be profitable, there has, over the past 25 years, been an enormous amount of pressure for television news programs to make money. You don't make money, for the most part, by covering subjects like the economy; race relations; politics; foreign policy. You're more inclined to make money by covering stories like the stain on Monica Lewinsky's dress, or stories like the young skating star who smashed her opponent's knee. Or the O. J. Simpson story, or that little girl who was the tiny-tot beauty queen who was murdered. Those kinds of stories get a ton of coverage. And some of it is quite good. But a lot of it is just dreadful. And a lot of what is on the air today is just an effort to report what has happened most recently. And what has happened most recently is not necessarily what is most important. The essence of journalism is not covering an event live; the essence of journalism is in the editing process. The essence of journalism has to do with sorting out that which is important from that which is not. For getting rid of the trivial. We tend to focus on the trivial and ignore the important.

MS: A student asked if the advent of news coverage on the Internet would lead to broadcast journalism's demise. Do you recall your response concerning an information anarchy in the coming

years? This is about the Internet giving us the news.

TK: The First Amendment to the Constitution does something quite extraordinary. And that is, it relieves everyone in the country from any kind of obligation to have any particular qualifications in order to become a journalist. Anyone in America can become a journalist simply by stating “I am a journalist.” That used to be an academic or at least an abstract proposition. Until the arrival of the Internet. Now, not only legally, not only in the abstract or academic sense, but quite literally, anyone can be a journalist. Without any training, without any qualifications, without having to meet

any standards; simply by writing whatever nonsense they want to, and pressing a key or two, on the Internet, they can put it out there. I think that fits the definition of informational anarchy. That doesn't mean that there isn't a lot of excellent stuff on the Internet. It simply means that there is no control over the Internet. There cannot be; there will not be; it was designed to be a piece of equipment that cannot be controlled. I mean, it was designed by the Pentagon, in the event of nuclear war, so that there could be communication within the command structure, and so that even a nuclear war could not disrupt the Internet. That to me suggests that we are well on our way into the world of information anarchy.

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