

That 's News?

*****NOTE: TEXT IN COLOR IS ESPECIALLY RELEVANT*****

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It was probably inevitable. We rest our collective "Talking Heads" for one week and miss the biggest television news story in years -- or at least since Greta-gate.

Well, "miss" might not be the right word. Even far away from the clatter chatter of the never-ending news cycle, the **David Letterman-Ted Koppel** flap seeped into our consciousness. We watched and read as esteemed journalists and commentators feigned surprise and outrage over ABC's failure to recognize the invaluable contribution that "Nightline" makes to civilization. But it was an entirely different couldn't-miss story that brought it all into focus for us.

For all that's been said, written and asserted over the past two weeks, the issues involved here are really rather simple. **The bottom line is that the news business is a business**; the most perplexing aspect of the whole affair is the level of surprise that revelation has generated.

Surely nobody has missed the fact that television news has exploded over the course of the last ten years. Could those who bemoan the attack on what they see as a "serious news" program have missed the rise of multiple all-news networks, the Internet and the age of instant information? And how can the self-appointed protectors of big-J journalism fail to acknowledge that even the networks long ago gave up on what they're so breathlessly fighting for?

Well, before the age of O'Reilly and the personality-driven news shows, the big three networks were running away from the "Nightline" style of programming in favor of what they call "news magazines" -- shows like "Dateline," "48 Hours" and "PrimeTime Live." News divisions funneled resources into these shows, which produce a mushy mix of news and features. These programs are like Forrest Gump's box of chocolates; you're more likely to see Anne Heche discussing her theories on alien abduction than a newsmaker interview.

The result is a "news" program that looks a lot like local news -- so much so that "Saturday Night Live" recently lampooned "Dateline" host Stone Phillips by having him announce: "I'm Stone Phillips. I was just in the basement doing the laundry. And what you don't know about the dryer could kill you."

Perhaps some of the surprise comes from the realization that if Koppel is expendable, no one is really safe. As television execs look for ways to cut costs and increase revenues, it's more and more of a no-brainer to look at the news divisions -- and the large payrolls there. In a very candid moment that seemed to voice that concern, "60 Minutes" veteran Leslie Stahl told Gail Shister of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*: "We're no longer a sacred cow. I always thought we had a little coating around us, that we were different from

all the others. We're not different.... It means, eventually, we're all in play. I worry for all of us.... We've been hearing for years that we're dinosaurs. We've held that off. It's been like the little Dutch boy with his thumb in the dike. I'm afraid the thumb is getting very tired."

The Real Evidence That The Future Is Now

The gap between the past and present of TV news came into ironic clarity last Monday. Following a week of dissecting the deeper meaning of Koppel's near-dump, we were confronted by the reality of today's news environment. We're speaking, of course, about the six-month anniversary of the Sept. 11th attacks. We'll bypass the fact that, by very definition, an "anniversary" has something to do with years, not months. What's more important is that, like it or not, this is what news has become.

Again, this is not surprising. We've seen it over and over again: The Gulf War, O.J., Jon Benet, Elián, the Florida recount, shark attacks. Today's television news needs a plot line, and the bigger the better.

In some ways, it's surprising that the networks waited six months for an anniversary extravaganza. Having yielded to good taste in the weeks following Sept. 11, television was once again free to re-air those pictures of airliners plunging into the World Trade Center buildings and of those buildings collapsing. They were free to plunge back into those heady days where the pictures took over and the viewers flocked to them in droves.

For better or worse, that's what television news is -- and what it's been for quite some time. The days of lengthy discussion of complex issues are long gone (if they ever existed), or at least relegated to public television. Most of those who toil in the industry understand this perfectly, as reading between the lines of recent ABC stories makes clear.

Many stories bluntly reported that ABC staffers don't universally share Koppel's view of "Nightline" as an untouchable journalistic institution. A *New York Times* story noting Koppel's demand that ABC publicly promise protection pointed out that some ABCers "expressed disapproval" with Koppel, and they "took issue with his implication that ABC News would be in disarray" without "Nightline."

Of course television news has changed. All of television has changed. But it didn't happen overnight. It didn't happen because of one decision made by one network's executives in search of more lucrative pastures. It happened over the course of at least 20 years, when cable came onto the scene providing more and more choices. And it didn't happen in a vacuum or under the radar; it happened in plain view of the entire industry. So why is it suddenly so shocking?

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