

**HOW TO  
WATCH  
TV NEWS**

Neil Postman  
and Steve Powers

*With New and Updated Material  
by Steve Powers*



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.  
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario,  
Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)  
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England  
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland  
(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)  
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,  
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)  
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Pandeshel Park,  
New Delhi - 110 017, India  
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand  
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)  
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,  
Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:  
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in Penguin Books 1992

This revised edition published 2008

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Postman, Neil.

How to watch TV news/Neil Postman and Steve Powers ; with new and updated materials by Steve Powers.—Rev. ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-14-31377-5

1. Television broadcasting of news—United States—Social aspects. 2. Television broadcasting of news—United States—Psychological aspects. 3. Content analysis (Communication) I. Powers, Steve, Ph. D. II. Title.

PN4888.T4P58 2008

070.4'3—dc22 2008015156

Printed in the United States of America

Set in Aldus with Agenda and Helvetica

Designed by Sabrina Bowers

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Author's Note

**I** WAS FORTUNATE TO HAVE a preeminent scholar and prescient thinker, Neil Postman, as both my teacher and coauthor for the original edition of *How to Watch TV News*. Unfortunately, he died on October 5, 2003, before this revision of the book.

His forward thinking, insights, and seminal work on the original manuscript remain largely intact; my mentor's teachings permeate each page. I miss his counsel, original thoughts, sense of humor, and friendship.

STEVE POWERS  
NOVEMBER 2007

whether or not they "like" it. To understand what is happening in the world, and what it means, requires knowledge of historical, political, and social contexts. It is the task of journalists to provide people with such knowledge. News is not entertainment. It is a necessity in a democratic society. Therefore, TV news must give people what they *need* along with what they *want*. The solution is to present news in a form that will compel the attention of a large audience without subverting the goal of informing the public. But as things stand now, it is essential that any viewer understand the following when turning on a TV news show:

1. American television is an unsleeping money machine.
2. While journalists pursue newsworthy events, business-oriented management often makes decisions based on business considerations.
3. Many decisions about the form and content of news programs are made on the basis of information about the viewer, the purpose of which is to keep viewers watching so that they will be exposed to commercials.

This is, obviously, not all that can be said about news. If it were, we could end our book here. But anything else that can, and will, be said must be understood within the framework of TV news as a *commercial* enterprise.

## CHAPTER 2

### What Is News?

**A**LL THIS TALK ABOUT news, but what is it? We turn to this question because unless a television viewer has considered it, he or she is in danger of too easily accepting someone else's definition: for example, one supplied by the news director of a television station or, even worse, imposed by important advertisers. The question, in any case, is not a simple one, and it is even possible that many journalists and advertisers have not thought deeply about it.

A simplistic definition of news can be drawn by paraphrasing Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's famous definition of the law. The law, Holmes said, is what the courts say it is. Nothing more. Nothing less. In similar fashion, we might say that the news is what news directors and journalists say it is. In other words, when you turn on your television set to watch a network or local news show, whatever is on it, by definition, the news. But if we were to take that approach, on what basis could we say that we haven't been told enough? Or that a story should have been covered but wasn't? Or that too many

stories of a certain type were included? Or that a reporter gave a flagrantly biased account?

If objections of this kind are raised by viewers, they must have some conception of the news that the news show has not fulfilled. Most people, in fact, do have such a conception, although they are not always fully conscious of what it is. When people are asked, "What is the news?" the most frequent answer is that the news is "what happened that day." This is a rather silly answer since even those who give it can easily be made to see that an uncountable number of things happen during the course of a day, including your breakfast, that could hardly be classified as news by any definition. In modifying their answer, most will add that the news is "important and interesting events that happened that day." This helps a little but leaves open the question of what is "important and interesting" and how that is decided. Embedded somewhere in one's understanding of the phrase "important and interesting events" is one's definition of the news.

Of course, some people will say that the question of what is important and interesting is not in the least problematic. What the president says or does is important; wars are important, and so are rebellions, employment figures, elections, and appointments to the Supreme Court. Really? We doubt that even the president believes everything he says is important (take, for example, the elder president Bush's remark that he doesn't like broccoli). There are, as we write, more than fifteen to twenty wars and rebellions going on in the world. Not even the *New York Times*, which claims to be the "newspaper of public record," reports on all, or even most, of them. Are elections important? Maybe. But we doubt you're too interested in the election in Iowa's Third Congressional District, unless you happen to live there. Some readers will remember the famous comedy routine "The Two Thousand Year Old Man"

by Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks. Upon being asked what he believed to be the greatest invention of humankind during his life span, the old man replied unhesitatingly, "Saran Wrap." Now, there is a great deal to be said for Saran Wrap. We suspect that in the long run it may prove more useful to the well-being of most of us than a number of inventions daily given widespread publicity in the news media. Yet it is fair to say that almost no one except its manufacturer knows the date of Saran Wrap's invention or even cares much to know. Saran Wrap is not news. The latest Hollywood star charged with DUI is. Or so some people believe.

On the day Marilyn Monroe committed suicide, so did many other people, some of whom may have had reasons as engrossing as, and perhaps more significant than, Miss Monroe's. But we shall never know about those people or their reasons; the journalists at CBS and NBC and the *New York Times* simply took no notice of them. Several people, we are sure, also committed suicide on the day in 2006 when the St. Louis Cardinals won the World Series. We shall never learn about those people either however instructive or interesting their stories may have been.

What we are driving at is this: "importance" is a judgment people make. Of course, some events—the assassination of a president, an earthquake, etc.—have near-universal interest and consequences. But most news does not inhere in the event. An event *becomes* news. And it becomes news because it is selected for notice out of the buzzing, booming confusion around us. This may seem a fairly obvious point, but keep in mind that many people believe the news is always "out there" waiting to be gathered or collected. In fact, the news is more often *made* than gathered. And it is made on the basis of what the journalist thinks important or what the journalist thinks the audience thinks is important or interesting.

In September 2007, a study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism showed that people who went online for their news gravitated toward topics different from those offered by traditional news outlets. Many of the stories selected by online users did not even appear anywhere among the top stories in the mainstream media. The study found that on Yahoo! News, even when choosing from a limited list of stories Yahoo! editors had selected, users' top stories only rarely matched those picked by the news professionals. The survey concluded, "In short, the user-news agenda, at least in this one-week snapshot, was more diverse, yet also more fragmented and transitory than that of the mainstream news media." In the week reviewed "when the mainstream press was focused on Iraq and the debate over immigration, the three leading user-news sites—reddit.com, Digg, and del.icio.us—were focused on stories like the release of Apple's new iPhone and that Nintendo had surpassed Sony in net worth."

It can get pretty complicated. Is a story about a killing in Northern Ireland more important than one about a killing in Morocco? The journalist might not think so, but the audience might. Which story will become the news? And once selected, what point of view and details are to be included? After all, once a journalist has chosen an event to be news, he or she must also choose what about it is worth seeing, is worth neglecting, and is worth remembering or forgetting. This is simply another way of saying that every news story is a reflection of the reporter who tells the story. The reporter's previous assumptions about what is "out there" edit what he or she thinks is there. For example, many journalists believe that the intifada in the Middle East is newsworthy. Let us suppose that a fourteen-year-old Palestinian boy hurls a Molotov cocktail at two eighteen-year-old Israeli soldiers. The

explosion knocks one of the soldiers down and damages his left eye. The other soldier, terrified, fires a shot that kills the Palestinian instantly. The injured soldier eventually loses his sight in the damaged eye. What details should be included in reporting this event? Is the age of the Palestinian relevant? Are the ages of the Israeli soldiers relevant? Is the injury to the soldier relevant? Was the act of the Palestinian provoked by the mere presence of the Israeli soldiers? Was the act therefore justified? Is shooting justified? Is the state of mind of the shooter relevant?

The answers to all these questions, as well as to other questions about the event, depend entirely on the point of view of the journalist. You might think this an exaggeration, that reporters, irrespective of their assumptions, can at least get the facts straight. But what are facts? In A. J. Liebling's book *The Press*, he gives a classic example of the problematic nature of "facts." On the same day, some years ago, both the *Wall Street Journal* and the now-defunct *World-Telegram and Sun* featured a story about the streets of Moscow. Here is what the *Wall Street Journal* reporter wrote:

The streets of central Moscow are, as the guidebooks say, clean and neat; so is the famed subway. They are so because of an army of women with brooms, pans, and carts who thus earn their 35 rubles a month in lieu of "relief", in all Moscow we never saw a mechanical street sweeper.

Here is what the *World-Telegram and Sun* reporter wrote:

Four years ago [in Moscow] women by the hundreds swept big city streets. Now you rarely see more than a dozen. The streets are kept clean with giant brushing and sprinkling machines.

Well, which is it? Can a dozen women look like an army? Are there giant machines cleaning the streets of Moscow or not? How can two trained journalists see events so differently? Well, one of them worked for the *Wall Street Journal*, and when these stories were written, it was the policy of the *Journal* to highlight the contrast between the primitive Russian economy and the sophisticated American economy (it still is). Does this mean the *Journal* reporter was lying? Unlikely. Each of our senses is a remarkably astute censor. For example, in a journalism class on reporting at New York University, the professor arranged for a man to burst into a class unannounced. The man shouted gibberish at the professor, waving his arms in a threatening way. Most students dove for cover, and a few stood up protectively as the man completed his unintelligible tirade and then ran out of the room.

When asked to write down what they heard and saw, the class had varying answers. Some described the man as having a mustache, others a full beard. Some said his shirt was green, others red. His pants were brown, or black, and so on. Some heard him say he was jealous of the professor's relationship with his wife, another heard the man accuse the professor of stealing something from him. All those conflicting descriptions; all those ears hearing the same thing, all those eyes observing the same scene! We see what we expect to see. Often, we focus on what we are paid to see. And those who pay us to see usually expect us to accept their notions not only of what is important but of what details are important.

That fact poses some difficult problems for those of us trying to make sense of the news we are given. One of those problems is indicated by a proposal, made years ago, by the great French writer Albert Camus. Camus wished to establish "a control newspaper." The paper would come out one hour after all the others and would contain estimates of the percentage

of truth in each of the stories. In Camus's words (quoted in Liebling's *The Press*): "We'd have complete dossiers on the interests, policies, and idiosyncrasies of the owners. Then we'd have a dossier on every journalist in the world. The interests, prejudices, and quirks of the owner would equal Z. The prejudices, quirks, and private interests of the journalist Y. Z times Y would give you X, the probable amount of truth in the story."

Camus was either a reckless mathematician or else he simply neglected to say why and how multiplying Z and Y would tell us what we need to know. (Why not add or divide them?) Nor did he discuss the problem of how to estimate the reliability of those doing the estimating. In any case, Camus died before he had a chance to publish such a newspaper, leaving each one of us to be our own "control" center. Nonetheless, we can't help thinking about how Camus's idea might be applied to television. Imagine how informative it would be if there were a five-minute television program that went on immediately after each television news show. The host might say something like this: "To begin with, this station is owned by Gary Farnsworth, who is also the president of Bontel Limited, the principal stockholder in which is the sultan of Bahrain. Bontel Limited owns three Japanese electronics companies, two oil companies, the entire country of Burkina Faso, and the western part of Romania. The anchorman on the television show earns \$800,000 a year; his portfolio includes holdings in a major computer firm. He has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Arkansas but was a C-plus student, has never taken a course in political science, and speaks no language other than English. Last year, he read only two books: a biography of Angelina Jolie and a book of popular psychology called *Why Am I So Depressed?* The reporter who covered the story on Iraq speaks Arabic, has a degree in international relations, and had a Neiman Fellowship at Harvard University."

We think this kind of information would be helpful to a viewer, although not for the same reason CNN did. Such information would not give an estimate of the "truth probability" of stories, but it would suggest possible patterns of influence reflected in the news. After all, what is important to a person whose boss owns several oil companies might not be important to a person who doesn't even have a boss, who is unemployed. Similarly, the perceptions of a reporter who does not know the language of the people he or she reports on will probably be different from those of a reporter who knows the language well.

What we are saying is that to answer the question "What is news?" a viewer must know something about the political beliefs and economic situation of those who provide the news. The viewer is then in a better position to know why certain events are considered important by those in charge of television news and may compare those judgments with his or her own. This would have been helpful, for example, in May 2007 when "Breaking News" flashed on the bottom of the screen following a Rangers play-off game in Madison Square Garden. What was the breathtaking breaking news? We quote, "Tony Bennett will be appearing at Radio City Music Hall in September." It would have helped to know that MSG cable is owned by Cablevision and—surprise—that Cablevision also owns Radio City.

Consider that General Electric lists these media companies it owns:

Bravo, CNBC, Focus Features, international channels, MSNBC (with Microsoft), mun2, NBC Entertainment, NBC News, NBC television network, NBC Universal Cable, NBC Universal Sports & Olympics, NBC Universal International Television Distribution, NBC Universal Television Studio, Paxson, Sci Fi, ShopNBC, Telemundo, TRIO, Universal Parks & Resorts, Universal Pictures, Universal Studios Home Entertainment, and the USA Network.

GE also owns part of:

A&E cable, American Movie Classics, Biography, Court TV, The History Channel, National Geographic Worldwide, among others.

Beyond media, GE Advanced Materials, makes:

LNP Engineering Plastics, plastics, polymershapes, quartz, silicones, specialty film and sheets.

GE's Consumer and Industrial division makes:

automotive, commercial lighting, electrical distribution, and entertainment products.

GE has a hand in energy, dealing in:

air-cooled heat exchangers, boiler management products, centrifugal pumps, combined cycle, compressors, electrical test equipment, environmental products, gas turbines, generators, GIS and platform software, hydropower and water control, nuclear plants and instrumentation, oil exploration systems and sensors, plant performance software, radiation monitors, reactors and steam condensers, reciprocating gas engines, reducing and metering systems, SCADA/EMS/DMS software, steam turbines, substation automation products, substation monitoring and diagnostics, telecommunications software, turbine control systems, turboexpanders, utility software, valves, and wind turbines.

GE is involved in healthcare, including

biomedical engineering, cardiology, clinical information systems, emergency department, gastrointestinal center, intensive and critical care units, obstetrics, oncology, orthopedics and sports medicine, radiology, surgery and perioperative, wireless clinical communications networks, and a women's health center.

GE's involvement with infrastructure includes

sensing, security, water, GE Fanuc Automation.

GE has interests in insurance solutions:

Global Life & Health, Global Property & Casualty, and GE Commercial Insurance.

GE Transportation is involved in:

commercial engines, corporate aviation, drilling, freight rail, marine aviation, marine and stationary, military aviation, mining, and passenger rail.

Media educator Ben Bagdikian says that even "though today's media reach more Americans than ever before, they are controlled by the smallest number of owners than ever before . . . in 1983, there were fifty dominant media corporations, today there are five." Indeed, Senator Ernest "Fritz" Hollings (D-SC) and Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK), both members of the Commerce Committee, complained that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is "allowing the self-interest of a few media titans to trump the public's interest in protecting a diverse marketplace of ideas." Beside the problem on

concentrated ownership, Hollings said, "Already the top five programmers—Viacom/CBS, Disney/ABC, NBC, Time Warner and News Corp./Fox—now control 75 percent of prime-time programming and are soon projected to increase their share to 85 percent."

There is evidence that the media concentration is having an effect on local news coverage. A former lawyer at the FCC claims the commission ordered its staff to destroy all copies of a draft study that suggested greater concentration of media ownership would hurt local TV news coverage. The report, written in 2004, came to light during the Senate confirmation hearing for FCC chairman Kevin Martin.

And here's another problem: As we have implied, even oil magnates and poorly prepared journalists do not consult, exclusively, their own interests in selecting the "truths" they will tell. Since they want people to watch their shows, they also try to determine what audiences think is important and interesting. There is, in fact, a point of view that argues against journalists' imposing their own sense of significance on an audience. In this view, television news should consist only of those events that would interest the audience. The journalists must keep their own opinions to themselves. The response to this is that many viewers depend on journalists to advise them of what is important. Besides, even if journalists were mere followers of public interest, not all members of the audience agree on what they wish to know. For example, we do not happen to think that Larry King's adventures in marriage are of any importance to anyone but him and Frada Miller, Alene Akins, Mickey Sutphin, Sharon Lepore, Julie Alexander, and Shawn Southwick. Nor are Jennifer Lopez's marriages to Cris Judd, Ojani Noa, Marc Anthony and her engagement to Ben Affleck important news. Why would anyone care about the latest party Paris Hilton attended and how much she had to



drink and who spilled what on whom? What's our point? A viewer must not only know what he or she thinks is significant but what others believe is significant as well.

It is a matter to be seriously considered. You may conclude, for example, that other people do not have a profound conception of what is significant. You may even be contemptuous of the tastes or interests of others. Or, you may share your sense of significance with the majority of people. It is not our purpose here to question what you or anyone else may regard as a significant event. We are, however, saying that in considering the question "What is news?" the viewer must always take into account his or her relationship to a larger audience. Television is a mass medium, which means that a television news show is not intended for you alone. It is public communication, and the viewer needs to have some knowledge and opinions about "the public." It is a common complaint of individuals that television news rarely includes stories about some part of the world in which those individuals have some special interest. We know a man, for example, who emigrated from Switzerland thirty years ago. He is an American citizen but retains a lively interest in his native land. "Why," he asked us, "are there never any stories about Switzerland?" "Because," we had to reply, "no one but you and a few others have any interest in Switzerland." "That's too bad," he replied. "Switzerland is an interesting country." We agree. But most Americans have not been to Switzerland, probably believe that not much happens in Switzerland, do not have many relatives in Switzerland, and would much rather know about what some English lord has to say about the world's economy than what a Swiss banker thinks. Maybe they are right, maybe not. Judging the public mind is always risky.

And this leads to another difficulty in answering the question "What is news?" Some might agree with us that Paris Hilton's adventures do not constitute significant events but

also think that they ought to be included in a news show precisely for that reason. Her experiences, they may say, are amusing or diverting, certainly engrossing. In other words, the purpose of news should be to give people pleasure, at least to the extent that it takes their minds off their own troubles. We have heard people say that getting through the day is difficult enough: filled with tension, anxiety, and often disappointment. When they turn on the news, they want relief, not aggravation. It is also said that whether entertaining or not, stories about the lives of celebrities should be included because they are instructive; they reveal a great deal about our society: its mores, values, ideals. Mark Twain once remarked that news is history in its first and best form. The American poet Ezra Pound added an interesting idea to that. He defined literature as news that *stays* news. Among other things, Pound meant that the stuff of literature originates not in stories about the World Bank or an armistice agreement but in those simple, repeatable tales that reflect the pain, confusion, or exaltations that are constant in human experience and touch us at the deepest levels. For example, consider the death of Princess Diana. Who was Diana to you or you to Diana that you should have been told so much about her when she died? Here is a possible answer: Diana Spencer was a beautiful commoner who became a princess and involved in the world. Suddenly, very nearly without warning, she was struck down at the height of her renown. Why? What are we to make of it? Why her? It is like some Old Testament parable, these questions were raised five thousand years ago, and we still raise them today. It is the kind of story that stays news, and that is why it must be given prominence. Or so some people believe.

What about the kind of news that doesn't stay news, that is neither the stuff of history nor literature: the fires, rapes, and murders that are daily featured on local television news?

Who has decided that they are important, and why? One cynical answer is that they are there because viewers take comfort in the realization that they have escaped disaster. At least for that day. It doesn't matter who in particular was murdered—the viewer wasn't. We tune in to find out how lucky we are and go to sleep with the pleasure of knowing that we have survived. A somewhat different answer goes this way: it is the task of the news show to provide a daily accounting of the progress of society. This can be done in many ways, some of them abstract (for example, a report on the state of unemployment), some of them concrete (for example, reports on particularly gruesome murders). These reports, especially those of a concrete nature, are the daily facts from which the audience is expected to draw appropriate conclusions about the question "What kind of society am I a member of?" Studies conducted by Professor George Gerbner and his associates at the University of Pennsylvania have shown that people who are heavy television viewers, including viewers of television news shows, believe their communities are much more dangerous than do light television viewers. Television news, in other words, tends to frighten people. The question is, ought they to be frightened? which begs the question, Is the news an accurate portrayal of where we are as a society? Which leads to another question: Is it possible for daily news to give such a picture? Many journalists believe it is possible. Some are skeptical. The early-twentieth-century journalist Lincoln Steffens proved that he could create a "crime wave" anytime he wanted by simply writing about all the crimes that normally occur in a large city during the course of a month. He could also end the "crime wave" by not writing about them. In his autobiography, Steffens describes how he and fellow reporter Jacob Riis started to report New York City street crimes more fully, and sensationally, in their papers. Other reporters followed suit,

and suddenly New York's papers were chock full of crime stories and articles about the "crime wave." The same number of muggings, robberies, burglaries, and scams had been going on for years. In fact, there actually had been a recent *reduction* in the number of many crimes!

If crime waves can be manufactured by journalists, how accurate are news shows in depicting the condition of a society? Besides, murders, rapes, and fires (even unemployment figures) are not the only way to assess the progress (or regress) of a society. Why are there so few television stories about symphonies that have been composed, novels written, scientific problems solved, and a thousand other creative acts that occur during the course of a month? Were television news to be filled with these events, we would not be frightened. We would, in fact, be inspired, optimistic, cheerful.

One answer is as follows: these events make poor television news because there is so little to show about them. In the judgment of most editors, people *watch* television. And what they are interested in watching are exciting, intriguing, or exotic pictures. Suppose a scientist has developed a new theory about how to measure with more exactitude the speed with which heavenly objects are moving away from the earth. It is difficult to televise a theory, especially if it involves complex mathematics. You can show the scientist talking about his theory, but that does not make for good television, and too much of it would drive viewers to other stations. In any case, the news show could only give the scientist twenty seconds of airtime because time is an important commodity. Newspapers and magazines sell space, which is not without its limitations for a commercial enterprise. But space can be expanded. Television sells time, and time cannot be expanded. This means that whatever else is neglected, commercials cannot be. Which leads to another possible answer to the question What is news? News, we might say, may be

history in its first and best form, or the stuff of literature, or a record of the condition of a society, or the expression of the passions of a public, or the prejudices of journalists. It may be all of those things, but in its worst form it can also be mainly a filler, a come-on, to keep the viewer's attention until the commercials come. Certain producers have learned that by pandering to the audience, by eschewing solid news and replacing it with leering sensationalism, they can essentially present a "television commercial show" interrupted by so-called news.

On February 8, 2007, former Playmate Anna Nicole Smith suddenly died. The Project for Excellence in Journalism reported that her death drew more coverage on cable news than the Iraq war. For that week, her death consumed 21 percent of cable airtime, more than any other story. The Smith story consumed a mind-boggling 50 percent of the cable news hole on February 8 and 9. The day after her death, the research Web site thinkprogress.org reported CNN referred to Anna Nicole Smith 522 percent more frequently than it did to Iraq; and MSNBC, 708 percent. During its coverage, Wolf Blitzer's *The Situation Room* had an average audience of 1.7 million viewers, nearly triple that from the same hour the day before.

In the week ending February 11, ratings for syndicated entertainment news shows were through the roof. *Entertainment Tonight* recorded its best numbers in more than three years. Other programs followed suit: *Inside Edition* was up 11 percent to a new season high; *The Insider* was up 7 percent, a tie for the show's all-time high, and *Extra* was up 4 percent, also to a new season high.

In similar fashion, CNN *Headline News* became America's top-rated cable news network for a full hour in 2006 by showing a car chase in Houston, Texas. No O. J. Simpson, no fugitive from justice, just a car chase. More than 1.5 million viewers watched police chase a car. In another attempt to get

more people to watch, the CBS *Evening News* asked its audience to vote on three different stories every Friday. Reporter Steve Hartman would cover the winning story.

One week they voted to send Hartman to Mount Airy, North Carolina, to do a story about a statue of the late actor Don Knotts as his character Barney Fife from *The Andy Griffith Show* (the town already had a statue of Sheriff Andy Taylor and his son, Opie). Need we tell you that *The Andy Griffith Show* aired on CBS? News shows on Fox affiliates seem to think stories about their popular shows *American Idol* and *24* are newsworthy, and the *Today* show welcomes a parade of featured players from NBC programs. In short, news programs have become another venue for promoting the entertainment interests of networks and local stations.

All of which leads us to reiterate, first, that there are no simple answers to the question "What is news?" and, second, that it is not our purpose to tell you what you ought to believe about the question. The purpose of this chapter is to arouse your interest in thinking *about* the question. Your answers are to be found by knowing what you feel is significant and how your sense of the significant conforms with or departs from that of others, including broadcasters, their bosses, and their audiences. Your answers are to be found in your ideas about the purposes of public communication and in your judgment of the kind of society you live in and wish to live in. We cannot provide answers to these questions. But you also need to know something about the problems, limitations, traditions, motivations, and, yes, even the delusions of the television news industry. That's where we can help you to know how to watch television news.