



MY BIG DUMB TV ANCHOR

The airhead anchorman is network news's greatest creation — and now, its biggest problem. PLUS: TV's dumbest, meanest, laziest, and vainest news personalities — an exclusive Radar investigation. Photograph by Matt Ducklo

There's a story that makes the rounds at CNN: Back in the early 1980s, when Ted Turner's network was still an underproduced skin-and-bones affair and the talent wore cheap suits, a couple of midday newsreaders named Rick Brown and Jim Wilkerson were co-anchoring a broadcast. Somehow their teleprompter scripts got mixed up, and Wilkerson signed off the newscast like so: "Those are the headlines. I'm Rick Brown."

A moment passed. A glance at his desk, a shuffle of papers, a flash of recognition. Wilkerson looked into the camera: "No, I'm not."

The moral of this story is obvious and unsurprising: Many of the people who narrate the goings-on around the world for us on television are stupid.

But here's what's not so obvious: Anchors have to be this way. They wouldn't be where they are if they weren't. It is not a coincidence that networks have cultivated a certain lack of self-awareness among those who fill the anchor chairs, nor that only a certain sort of dullard tends to ascend through the ranks.

The anchor's job is cruel and bizarre. Anchors must read from the crawling teleprompters, listen to the frantic producers guiding them through their earpieces, and refer to the notes and briefing books on the desks in front of them. They must assimilate these streams of information into a bland, lukewarm broth of news palatable to old ladies in Oklahoma.

In the business it's simply known as reading. It is not easy, and it does something to people. It empties them out and turns them into conduits. That



perpetual surrender to incoming information wears away at the normal parts of a person's brain like water over a rock, leaving a smooth and clean channel for the news to flow through. The things that we normally associate with intelligence — the ability to critically evaluate ideas, the ability to actually think about what one is saying — become hindrances for the anchor. Just as watching TV makes you dumb, being on TV can make you dumb — or, at the very least, it can warp your mind into something that isn't altogether bright, something immune to apprehending the absurdity of solemnly recounting in the same 22-minute broadcast the Iraq war's latest casualties and the allegation that Michael Jackson took a nine- or 10-year-old boy's penis into his mouth. To be an anchor is by necessity to be a little banal, a lot self-effacing, to become a collection of parts: a sonorous voice, a steady gaze, a reassuring, unflappable countenance. It is, in other words, to trade the messy, unpredictable idiosyncrasies of humanness for the cool reliability of droidness. Is it any wonder the anchor has become such an easy target for satire? To be an anchor is somewhat akin to being an actor who never gets to step out of character. It's a postmodern hell.

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"You have to be willing to take direction and surrender control to people you trust," explains one former ABC News producer who has spoken into Peter Jennings's earpiece. And if you trust the teleprompter operator, and he's telling you that you're Rick Brown, well, then you must be Rick Brown.

This disembodiment is what made the Readers — Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, and, less consistently, Dan Rather — such iconic presences. They're not stupid men, though many, many of their lesser colleagues are, as you can see in our survey of news producers and correspondents on page 104. But they all have, to varying degrees, a little bit of Jim Wilkerson in them.

The sense of disconnection that made the Readers such good anchors also makes them seem otherworldly, not quite earthbound. The Big Three anchors spout platitudes for a living and are trained to speak warmly and comfortably on cue, a skill that brings success on camera but is disconcerting in person. To see Tom Brokaw amble onstage at a press event in Los Angeles last summer and, unbidden, offer an utterly bloodless 20-minute analysis of the 2004 presidential campaign before a gaggle of reporters far more interested in his reflections on his career was to see a man who was able to turn himself on like a faucet while remaining totally unaware of his audience. Afterward I watched a reporter attempt to engage him in a debate about the network news's failure to aggressively contradict White House claims about weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to the Iraq war. And though Brokaw was there, he was not present. He spoke in mildly defensive tape loops, as though a hard drive in his head were simply repeating whatever it had last recorded. Even though there was nothing to read, he was reading.

Now the Readers are going or gone: Brokaw said goodbye in December, Rather in March, Ted Koppel offered ABC his resignation in April, and just days later his colleague Peter Jennings began an indeterminate leave from the anchor chair to undergo treatment for lung cancer. Many of the names most often bandied about as the stars of the next generation of anchors — CNN's Anderson Cooper and ABC News's George Stephanopoulos, for example — are different. It goes without saying that, in a crowded cable world, they will never attain the status of a Brokaw. But they also have qualities that are rewarded in a much more fractured media environment. Like personalities. (Well, some of them, at least: See "Battle of the Network Anchors.")

"It's not about reading anymore," says one powerful agent. "It's about communicating and storytelling and interviewing." It is also, thanks to the fascination among the news elite with Jon Stewart's nightly vivisection of its work, about winking, ever so subtly, at the audience.

Which helps explain the news business's fixation on Cooper, even though he plainly struggles at the anchor desk. (He is perhaps too aware of himself to comfortably give himself over to the machinery of the studio.) When he's in the field, interacting with the world, Cooper can be seen as the relatively normal guy he is. Similarly, Stephanopoulos looks pained when he addresses the camera, but when interviewing people he comes across as smart, curious, and accessible.

There are others — Tucker Carlson and Keith Olbermann at MSNBC, Shepard Smith at Fox, Bill Weir at ABC — who seem capable, under the right conditions, of appearing on television as themselves rather than as men whose minds have been hijacked by a news division.

The question, however, is whether the network managers have the courage to actually populate a newscast with people who know that they are not Rick Brown. People with personalities, after all, are much less likely to be as tractable as people without them. The fact that no less a blow-dried wisp of a man than CBS News White House correspondent John Roberts was one of the strongest candidates to emerge initially as the replacement for Dan Rather does not bode well. Nor does the fact that the only person to permanently ascend to a coveted broadcast network anchor chair in the last 22 years has been NBC's Brian Williams, who, with his inked-on tan and unmoving slab of hair, is not so much the forerunner of a new guard in TV news as the last vestige of those who have gone before him. (And let us not forget why the question of anchorial succession is such an important one for the networks suits. Despite the media's constant death knell for it, network news remains a lucrative business. Even the limping *CBS Evening News* brings in more than \$100 million a year in advertising. A good talking head can make a newscast extraordinarily profitable.)

Even if the George Stephanopouloses of the news world *do* get a shot at the big time, it's an open question how long their relatively well-adjusted personalities can stand the onslaught of a nightly network newscast before they begin to suffer from the Wilkersonian tics of their forebears. So, as you watch Cooper awkwardly read the headlines on his CNN show (or perhaps on the new show the network is said to be developing for him that would go head to head with the networks' evening newscasts), enjoy at least the pleasure of seeing him while he still knows who he is. —**John Cook**