

Zucker Punched

The fast rise and sudden decline of Jeff Zucker, the network smart-ass who went from wunderkind to whipping boy in the billion-dollar blink of an eye. **BY JOHN COOK**



My Fabulous Career
 Jeff Zucker rocketed through NBC's news and entertainment divisions to the top spot at NBC Universal TV.

Neal Shapiro's send-off, held on the set of *Dateline NBC* on a Friday evening in September, was an awkward occasion.

It was awkward because NBCers were expected to take time out to fete Shapiro, the soft-spoken, low-key departing president of the network's news division, in the heat of their frantic coverage of hurricane Katrina's aftermath — which naturally raised the question of why a news division president would be leaving his job in the midst of overseeing perhaps the most important story of his career.

And it was awkward because éminence grise Tom Brokaw taped a video tribute to Shapiro's leadership from New Orleans, where the retired anchor really had no discernible business being, and made a jaw-dropping analogy between the news team that Shapiro had attracted to NBC and the disaster in the Gulf. The wave of talent coming to the network, Brokaw joked, "was like white people leaving New Orleans."

But the most awkward moment arrived when Shapiro's boss, Jeff Zucker, the bullet-headed chief of the NBC Universal Television Group, rose to speak in his honor. Zucker was Shapiro's longtime friend and occasional rival. But as most people present at the ceremony were well aware, Zucker was also the one who had forced Shapiro out. The nominal reason for his ouster was the sagging ratings of the *Today* show, the network's most lucrative franchise. In the face of surging competition from ABC's *Good Morning America*, *Today* had lost its way, and Shapiro seemed incapable of stemming the flow of viewers. As rumors flew all spring that he was going to be sacked, Shapiro had finally gone to Zucker's office in May to talk it over. According to a source familiar with the exchange, Zucker informed Shapiro that his contract, which ran through 2006, would not be

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renewed. Days later, quoting two unnamed senior executives, the *New York Times* reported that Shapiro had quit.

Of course, Shapiro had done no such thing, and since Zucker had not lined up a replacement, three and a half excruciating months would pass before Shapiro left. During that time NBC News was left essentially leaderless. "Jeff took a situation and clearly made it much worse," complains an NBC News correspondent. "It emasculated the news division. This was Jeff losing his temper and leaking news of Neal's demise before it happened."

mium at Shapiro's farewell.

"It was a little bit like Marc Antony talking about Caesar," recalls an NBC News staffer in attendance that night. "It's funny, because generally Zucker's a pretty smooth guy, but he was fumbling through the whole thing."

As he struggled through his speech, Zucker's colleagues might well have wondered whether he would be next to go. It was no secret, after all, that NBC's golden boy had plenty of other troubles to contend with. Since he assumed the mantle at the newly created NBC Universal Television

None of this would be of particular import if it weren't for the fact that it is happening to Jeff Zucker, the pugnacious, preposterously confident upstart who has been an industry legend ever since he virtually reinvented morning television at the precocious age of 26.

Zucker had joined NBC after graduating from Harvard, where he worked at the *Crimson* at the same time Conan O'Brien toiled at the *Lampoon*. As a field producer at *Today* in 1989, Zucker and Katie Couric quickly became joined at the hip. By 1992, with her support, he was named executive producer. Soon after, impressed by his drive and initiative, NBC gave him the *Nightly News with Tom Brokaw* as well. Though his disastrous stint with Brokaw ended five weeks later, on his watch *Today* became a phenomenal success. The innovations he put in place would be widely imitated by competitors. It was Zucker who initiated the live concert series, to the ongoing dismay of NBC's Rockefeller Center neighbors. He also brought the studio down to street level, so passersby could mug for the cameras and kibitz with the anchors, and initiated on-air weddings. "Every innovation of the last 10 years in morning TV has come out of the *Today* show," as Zucker put it with his usual modesty. *Today* became the highest-rated show on morning television, a cash cow posting profits of more than \$250 million a year; by age 35 Zucker was one of the most powerful players in network TV.

In 2000, when Wright promoted Zucker, who had made his reputation in the news



All Smiles
Last summer Lauer, left, and Couric solidified *Today*'s lead over *Good Morning America*.

Throughout his career Zucker had deftly managed his profile in the media, and inside NBC it was widely believed that he was the source of the leak. "The joke was always that both Neal and Jeff spent their days on the phone with reporters," says the NBC correspondent. "But Neal was talking to reporters who worked for him, and Jeff was talking to reporters who worked for the *New York Times*."

According to a well-placed source, NBC Universal CEO Bob Wright was alarmed by Zucker's clumsy handling of the news division transition. "It was messy, and people were shaking their heads," says an NBC News staffer.

In an apparent attempt to create the semblance of an orderly transition, Zucker decided to personally deliver an enco-

Zucker was convinced that Shapiro — who, even his friends acknowledge, inexplicably ignored the problems at *Today* for too long — had to go.

Group last year, the network's prime-time ratings had been in the tank. Reaction to the new fall prime-time schedule had been less than deafening, unless you include industry response to the nearly \$1 billion falloff in pre-season ad sales. Though the network publicly expressed support for Zucker, his tenure seemed increasingly uncertain, and by early fall NBC appeared to be shopping his job around: Rumors were circulating through the Rockefeller Center headquarters that it had already been offered to two other people.

division, many wondered whether the ambitious exec had the chops for the entertainment job. In fact the sole decoration in his office is a framed bulletproof vest that a friend sent him after his new post was announced. Zucker brushed off the doubters with characteristic disdain; soon after he moved to Los Angeles to take over NBC's vaunted roster of quality shows, he was ridiculing the studios for overspending on programs and was refusing to "waste" his time meeting with agents. One minute he was gloating about NBC's lock

on sophisticated, urban, upscale viewers; the next he was hyping special episodes of *Fear Factor* starring Playboy bunnies and putting *Emeril* on the air.

Not surprisingly, his recent troubles have been cause for some schadenfreude among rival executives, both inside and beyond NBC's walls.

"There's something about NBC," says a senior executive at a rival network. "A certain cockiness. Which is why a lot of people are finding this so delightful."

Here's what they find so delightful: Last season NBC's prime-time viewership fell a whopping 16 percent among 18- to 49-year-olds in the wake of flops like *Hawaii* and *Law & Order: Trial by Jury*. At last May's up-front market, where advertisers place their bets on the networks' upcoming fall schedules, NBC pulled in just \$2 billion, nearly a billion dollars less than in 2004.

Zucker had gone to Burbank to make sure the network successfully weathered the departure of its sole megahit and prime-time revenue engine, *Friends*. At the time slightly more than 7 million 18- to 49-year-olds were watching NBC, according to Nielsen Media Research, making it number one in the demographic. Last May, after Zucker had spent three years running the entertainment division and a year and a half at the TV group, that number had plunged 60 percent to 4.2 million, placing NBC dead last, behind CBS, ABC, and Fox.

Wright had given Zucker a three-part mandate: bring NBC, which got knocked out of first place by *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, into the unscripted game; keep *Friends* on the air for as many seasons as could be squeezed out of the producers and cast; and come up with a replacement for the aging hit that would keep young viewers in the network fold on Thursday night, the highest-revenue night in prime time. Zucker accomplished the first two tasks with aplomb: *Fear Factor*, *The Weakest Link*, and *The Apprentice* all kept the viewers coming. And by heaping truckloads of cash on the cast of *Friends*, he kept the creaky show going for two more seasons. But the third goal was the real key to NBC's continued success. Zucker had better pull the next *Friends* out of his hat.

Cut to: *Inside Schwartz*, *Good Morning Miami*, *Three Sisters*, *In-Laws*, *Happy Family*, *Come to*

Turn On, Tune In, Turn Off

Jeff Zucker launched a slew of shows that even he couldn't stomach for a full season. That didn't stop him from hyping them as the next *Friends*.

Father of the Pride (2004)

PREMISE: Poorly timed Dreamworks series about Siegfried and Roy's lions — despite a near fatal attack on Roy. ["Siegfried kept encouraging us not to stop," said Dreamworks co-founder Jeffrey Katzenberg. "He would say, 'Roy would want you to keep going.'"]

ZUCKER'S HYPE: "[One of the] most high-profile and anticipated half-hours of the 2004 television season."

REALITYCHECK: *The Los Angeles Times* declared the \$1.6-million-per-episode series the season's "Most Expensive Dud."

LIFESPAN: Axed with two episodes left in its first season.

Emeril (2001)

PREMISE: Idiomatic metasitcom about a celebrity chef with — surprise! — his own cooking show. CBS and ABC passed on it — as did NBC, before

Zucker overruled.

ZUCKER'S HYPE: "Think of it as *Home Improvement* and put *Emeril* into it as a workplace comedy.... I have a gut belief that it may respond with people out in the country."

LIFESPAN: Canceled with six unaired episodes.

POSTMORTEM: "The biggest mistake I've made?" Zucker said. "Probably *Emeril*."

Kingpin (2003)

PREMISE: An attempted cure for *Sopranos* envy, with Mexicans instead of Italians and drug trafficking instead of money laundering.

ZUCKER'S HYPE: "What David Mills has come up with is far closer to Shakespeare than *The Sopranos*.... Closer to the conflict and internal guilt that a Hamlet or a Macbeth feels."

REALITYCHECK: "Kingpin is what you get when you suck the soul (and the fat) from *The Sopranos*," one TV critic noted. "Aaron Spelling's *The Godfather IV: Stuck in Traffic*."

LIFESPAN: Six episodes.

The Contender (2005)

PREMISE: A reality drama/competition about aspiring boxers, hosted by a facially paralyzed Sly Stallone.

ZUCKER'S HYPE: "It's probably Mark Burnett's best work, and that's to take nothing away from *Survivor* and *The Apprentice*. This is probably better than each of those."

RATINGS BLUES: The premiere got a boost from one contestant's suicide; in the weeks following it took a pummeling from ABC's short-lived *Jake in Progress*, starring pretty boy John Stamos. **LIFESPAN:** Bounced from the network after a season.

Coupling (2003)

PREMISE: A British import that relied on not-so-veiled references to oral sex.

ZUCKER'S HYPE: "It has a lot of adult themes in it and a lot of adult talk, but...I think America is ready for it." **LIFESPAN:** Spiked after four episodes.

STARTLING ADMISSION: "We knew we were in trouble when we saw the first taping of *Coupling*," Zucker confessed. "Sometimes miracles do happen, and that would have required a miracle. I've tried to forget it."

—Danielle Stein



Bungle in the Jungle

The poorly timed series with Siegfried and Roy's lions was one of Zucker's worst.

Papa, Coupling, Committed, and Whoopi, to name just a few.

"The day Zucker got the job was the day CBS announced that *Survivor* was moving to Thursday night," said one former NBC executive. In other words, Zucker was on notice from day one that CBS was laying the groundwork to steal Thursday nights from NBC in a post-*Friends* universe. "The writing was on the wall," the executive continued. "As NBC's development sucked and their shows started aging, he became a shlockmeister instead of figuring out how to develop quality shows."

Yet through it all Zucker managed to retain Wright's confidence, maneuvering himself into a promotion when NBC and Universal merged in May 2004, at the tail end of NBC's last season on top. He has long been rumored to be neck and neck with Randy Falco, who runs NBC's television stations, in the race to succeed Wright. Zucker brought in Kevin Reilly, the affable chief of FX who developed *Nip/Tuck* and *The Shield*, to take his place in Los Angeles — and to take the heat if he can't reverse the prime-time slide. "He's got the scapegoat sitting there," says

thing. Zucker has already survived two bouts with colon cancer (the illness that took Katie Couric's husband), in 1996 and again in 1999, when he had most of his colon removed.

At the Television Critics Association's biannual meetings in Los Angeles, when the networks trot out their stars and hype their lineups, Zucker is a favorite of reporters. They follow him around, tossing out questions he clearly delights in battling right back at them with swift, mildly insulting answers that explain a) why they really didn't understand what they were asking in the first place and b) that he has already made more money than all of them together will likely earn in their lifetimes. The reporters enjoy the abuse, because it is that rarest of things: a network executive's honestly expressed sentiment.

Zucker's defenders within NBC Universal insist that the network's troubles are not as bad as they seem. That billion-dollar figure is exaggerated, they say, because the network's costs are lower, and because it presold about 15 percent fewer ad slots in May than last year. In all, an NBC executive says, the true shortfall was closer to \$200–300 million.

Moreover, NBC may have sprung a leak,

(who, even friends acknowledge, inexplicably ignored the problems at *Today* for too long and failed to stanch MSNBC's laughable slide into cable irrelevance), had to go. By that time, says an NBC News insider, Zucker's relationship with Couric had soured.

The true test of Zucker's housecleaning at NBC News will be if *Today's* lead continues to hold with the return of ABC's *Desperate Housewives* and the inevitable Housewives' cakewalk across the set of *Good Morning America*.

The network dismisses any notion that Zucker's anointed status has been diminished. Says Immelt, "He has my full confidence. I love his passion and leadership." And Wright calls him an important part of NBC Universal's future."

But that future, with or without Zucker, looks bleak at the moment. NBC's fall schedule includes just six new prime-time shows, a timid response to last season's catastrophic audience defection. Among them are the comedy-with-heart *My Name Is Earl*, a critics' darling that premiered to strong ratings (then again, so did *Whoopi*), and *E-Ring*, a Jerry Bruckheimer military drama that had to be retooled before it even launched — a sure invitation to criti-

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the competing executive from another network, echoing a common complaint voiced by Zucker's detractors: that he's more talented at shifting blame for his mistakes than at running a network.

No one would expect Zucker to win a popularity contest among his competitors. His ambition is naked, and he is unabashed in both a desire to defeat his opponents and confidence in his own talent. But Zucker's star has apparently begun to fade where it matters most: Jeffrey Immelt, the CEO of General Electric, NBC's parent company. Immelt recently implied that Zucker's job is on the line, according to an analyst who covers GE. "Jeff Zucker's looking for guys to throw in front of the train," says the analyst. "That doesn't work with Immelt. He's got a silver bullet with Zucker's name on it."

If his vibe is that he basically doesn't have time for you, he may be forgiven: He's been faced more than once with the possibility that he might no longer have time for any-

but it's a much bigger boat than it once was. Whereas prime time once accounted for as much as 35 percent of NBC's bottom line, in the merged company, which draws revenue from Universal's film library, cable channels like USA Network and the SciFi Channel, and other assets, it's just 15 percent. Overall, NBC Universal's profits were up 27 percent in the second quarter of 2005.

But, as if Zucker's entertainment woes weren't enough, last year his news baby started slipping. *Today* was losing ground to ABC's *Good Morning America*, coming perilously close last May to ending its (at the time) 491-week winning streak. In April, under pressure from Zucker, Shapiro fired executive producer Tom Touchet and replaced him with Jim Bell, a former sports producer.

Today righted itself over the summer and restored the gap over *Good Morning America*. But Zucker was convinced that Shapiro,

cal lambasting and ratings death. Defying logic, Thursday night remains unchanged from last season.

"These aren't the shows that are going to take them to number one," says a media analyst at a major ad-buying firm. "I still believe Zucker is very smart, and I went out on a limb back in May [when NBC announced the schedule] and told my clients that he had something up his sleeve — that this is not the schedule NBC will launch. There's a bait and switch. Jeff Zucker *can't* be this stupid."

Who knows? At a meeting with *Dateline* NBC staffers in September, just days before the schedule was to launch, Zucker praised the newsmagazine, which has a habit of expanding throughout the season as new shows flop and executives demand cheap programming to fill the holes.

"Obviously," he said, according to an NBC News staffer, "we're going to be counting on you as we move through the schedule. Like, around week two." ❧