

Exit NBC anchor Tom Brokaw: A nonentity in the service of wealth and power

By David Walsh
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With a great deal of undeserved fanfare, NBC Nightly News anchorman Tom Brokaw delivered his final broadcast December 1. Brokaw was an American celebrity—in Oscar Wilde’s words, he was well known for being well known. His bowing out after 21 years on the job predictably became one of the major news stories of the day.

A self-satisfied nonentity, who has made no contribution to America’s understanding of itself or the world, Brokaw was praised as having the values of the “heartland,” one of the “plain-spoken figures that lean on tradition and instinct.” The news reader was feted as something akin to a modern-day Abraham Lincoln.

Brokaw is a very wealthy spokesman for the American ruling elite, who has never to anyone’s knowledge uttered a genuinely controversial sentence or formulated a thought that would make the powers-that-be lose any sleep. In recent years he has been earning, simply in his anchorman capacity, something in the vicinity of \$7 million a year. This is in addition to income gained from authoring the best-seller, *The Greatest Generation*, his homage to the generation that fought in World War II. Brokaw now plans to spend more time on his 5,000-acre ranch near Yellowstone Park in Montana. He will be missed by few, and remembered by even fewer.

In the two decades during which Brokaw presided over the NBC evening news the American media suffered a dreadful decline. Television news, in particular, has been transformed by economic and political processes into a purely profit-driven operation. More fundamentally, television news programs, packaged (and on occasion criticized) as entertainment, have become organs of state propaganda, transmitting the policies and claims of increasingly right-wing administrations in Washington as “news” and “facts.”

While millions of people around the globe, including in the US, marched in the streets in February 2003 to protest the imminent illegal American invasion of Iraq, Brokaw was reporting from the northern frontier of Kuwait, extolling the virtues of “a new band of brothers preparing for the first war of the 21st century.” As one commentator observed, Brokaw and other US media personalities, like CBS’s Dan Rather, “were already wearing khakis in the desert, driving humvees, profiling soldiers, hitching rides on helicopters and previewing high-tech weaponry.”

Of course, aside from supporting the general interests of American capitalism, Brokaw and his NBC crew at times have an even more specific, although unmentioned agenda. It has been

noted that when Brokaw and his colleagues praise the performance of the F/A-18 Hornet jet, for instance, they fail to note that NBC’s parent company, General Electric, produces the engine for the aircraft.

Chilling as the thought may be, on a daily basis in America official public opinion is organized through the narrow and corrupt channels of the “Today” show (NBC) and “Good Morning America” (ABC) in the mornings, the three network evening news programs, the interviews conducted by the incarnation of the lowest common denominator, Larry King on CNN, the monologues of late-night TV hosts Jay Leno and David Letterman, and, finally, offering the latest views of the US State Department, Ted Koppel on ABC’s “Nightline.”

This entire operation, as inevitable as the rising and setting of the sun, resumes each morning. On a daily basis, the American public is deliberately lied to, mystified, benumbed and degraded. The propaganda machine is dedicated to the principle that nothing that matters to wide layers of the population should be treated with honesty or objectivity.

The decline in the American television news has resulted from definite socio-political processes and the changes in personnel that inevitably accompany such changes. Different eras and outlooks call for correspondingly different personalities.

There was never a golden age of US television journalism. The medium as a mass phenomenon came into being during the Cold War, firmly under the control of large corporate interests. Nonetheless, those who dominated television news programming in the first decades of its existence were men and women who, for the most part, had lived through and been deeply influenced by the Depression and the Second World War. They shared a more democratic outlook, including a healthy hatred of fascist totalitarianism.

Among the most prominent names is that of Edward R. Murrow who, along with his associates William Shirer (eventually a victim of McCarthyism), Eric Sevareid, Richard C. Hottelet, Howard K. Smith, Charles Collingwood and others, began in radio, broadcasting news from Europe during the war. Murrow’s career spanned the infancy of radio news and public affairs programming and the ascendancy of television news in the 1950s.

A liberal and anti-communist, Murrow criticized Joseph McCarthy in a broadcast in March 1954, declaring: “We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason if we dig deep in our history and doctrine and remember that we are not descended from

fearful men, not from men who feared to write, to speak, to associate and to defend causes which were for the moment unpopular. We can deny our heritage and our history, but we cannot escape responsibility for the result. There is no way for a citizen of the Republic to abdicate his responsibility.”

Murrow is also famous for his *Harvest of Shame* program, an hour-long study of the plight of migratory workers in the US broadcast in November 1960.

Sevareid too, who eventually became the news commentator on CBS’s evening news program with Walter Cronkite, was an outspoken critic of McCarthy. He attended the University of Minnesota during the period of tumultuous labor struggles in the early 1930s. Collingwood was also well known for his hostility to the anti-communist witch-hunts.

These individuals were not geniuses, nor searching social critics, but they possessed some substance, including a modicum of backbone, and they revealed an ability to think. Some, like Cronkite, became open critics of the Vietnam War.

From the early 1980s, coinciding with America’s loss of worldwide economic hegemony, television news became dominated by a different human breed, uncritical cheerleaders for US foreign policy, particularly its increasingly numerous military interventions: Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989, and the first attack on Iraq, the Persian Gulf War of 1991.

The new personnel comprised different types. There were the political prostitutes like Peter Jennings of ABC’s “World News Tonight” (he also became anchorman in 1983), who began in Canadian television, and knows full well—or, at least, once knew—that much of what he is repeating nightly is false and ridiculous.

Brokaw, born in South Dakota in 1940, is another type, the mediocre nonentity. Chameleon-like, the Brokaws of this world are prepared to adapt themselves to whatever the ruling elite demands. Without strong conviction, but blessed with what passes for good looks and good hair, such individuals think nothing of jumping on reactionary bandwagons, such as the Clinton-Lewinsky sex scandal, to make their mark or gain in the ratings.

In *The Greatest Generation*, Brokaw resorted to pure hokum, resurrecting and marketing World War II for his own careerist interests and to justify the present-day ambitions of American imperialism. It would never occur to Brokaw that the cause of those millions who died fighting fascism was similar in character to the present-day struggle against US aggression and militarism all over the world.

Brokaw’s integrity and seriousness as a journalist might be measured in the following manner. How many interviews did he conduct from March 2003 until his retirement with opponents of the Iraq war? Despite the widespread opposition in the American population to the invasion, we feel safe in saying that Brokaw did not carry out a single in-depth conversation with a critic of Bush administration policy. Such interviews would not be “news.” On the other hand, he has provided a friendly platform on numerous occasions over the years for that reactionary blowhard Rush Limbaugh.

While they still churn out profits for the networks—reportedly

each of the network newscasts has made more than \$118 million in revenue in the first nine months of 2004 (advertisements cost some \$50,000 for 30 seconds)—the evening newscasts have suffered a serious erosion in their viewing audience. In 1970-71, 75 percent of US viewers watched one of the three evening news programs; by 1994-95, that figure had dropped to 52 percent; this year, with 300 cable channels and the Internet as competition, NBC, ABC and CBS command only 36 percent of the potential audience, some 26 million viewers. The median age of the network newscast viewer is 60. This, in itself, is an expression of growing popular mistrust and alienation from the official media organs.

Characteristically, the growth of interest in the Internet, particularly among young people, alarmed Brokaw, both for its political and economic implications. In an interview several years ago, he revealed his profoundly anti-democratic conceptions, asserting that cyberspace should be managed for younger audiences.

“We can’t let that generation and a whole segment of the population just slide away out to the Internet and retrieve what information it wants without being in on it,” he declared. “I also believe strongly that the Internet works best when there are gatekeepers. When there are people making determinations and judgments about what information is relevant and factual and useful. Otherwise, it’s like going to the rainforest and just seeing a green maze.” Bring on the Thought Police!

In reality, the corporate monopoly of the means by which the American population receives the bulk of its news and information represents a deep threat to democratic rights in the US and around the world. The confusion that made possible the election of a Bush is evidence enough that large numbers of people in the US consume mass quantities of misinformation.

The shameless promotion of the Iraq war by Brokaw, Jennings and Rather during the run-up to the invasion, including their cover-up of obvious lies, epitomizes the foul role played by the “free press” in contemporary American life. On the basis of their role in this murderous war alone, the media conglomerates deserve to be broken up, turned into public utilities and placed under the democratic control of the population.

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