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# Nightline: Network News or Newsbuffs' Oprah

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Nightline:

Network News or Newsbuffs' Oprah?

Julia Nienaber  
Thesis Outline  
Honors Thesis

Nightline:

Network News or Newsbuffs' Oprah?

Thesis: Although charges are made that Nightline is a documentary talkshow spotlighting already overexposed media news stars and events, Nightline is a valid news program and valuable addition to ABC news and news programming in general.

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## Nightline:

Network News or Newsbuffs' Oprah?

At 11:30 P.M. on May 27, 1987, Johnny Carson didn't watch Johnny Carson. Having taped his show earlier, he and much of the rest of the nation tuned in to ABC's Nightline instead. The next day, Carson called Nightline host Ted Koppel to congratulate him on his searing hour-long interview with Jim and Tammy Bakker. The program had eclipsed Carson in the overnight Nielsen ratings and had outdrawn NBC's dominant prime-time schedule (Alter, Michael, and Lerner 50). Over the years, Nightline has also featured exclusive interviews with top-shelf newsmakers like former Presidential candidate Gary Hart, former First Lady Nancy Reagan, Major General Richard Secord, and former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos (ABC Entertainment, News, and Sports 1988-89). Nightline and Ted Koppel have won every major award in broadcast journalism more than once, including two George Foster Peabody Awards, six Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Journalism Awards, four Overseas Press Club Awards, twenty-three Emmys, two George Polk Awards, and a score of others (ABC Entertainment, News, and Sports 1988-89).

Any show enjoying such success and popularity draws scrutiny, and Nightline is no exception. Indeed, it has had its share of criticism. On the light side is the August 27, 1989, episode of D.C. Follies which satirized the Bakker

interview. In the show, a Jim Bakker puppet quipped, "Ted, you act like prosecutor, jury, and judge, and like this is the modern Inquisition." A Ted Koppel puppet calmly replied, "Maybe this is." Although more serious charges are made that Nightline is a documentary talkshow spotlighting already overexposed media news stars and events, Nightline is a valid news program and valuable addition to ABC news and news programming in general (Massing 33).

But what is news? Though views on news are wide in scope and almost limitless in number, for the purposes of this paper, news is simply and functionally defined as events, happenings, or problems which are unusual or unique. News can also be categorized by types of stories. The democratic student revolt in China during the summer of 1989 was "hard" news, meaning serious news. A dancing dog or singing pig would be "soft" or filler news. Singing pigs would be unusual and, therefore, news, but have a less profound worldwide effect than governmental revolts. Distinctions between these two categories of news are not always clear, and this "gray area" leads to some debate about what actually ranks as serious and valid news.

The world news event that launched Nightline as a program was the 1979 seizure of American hostages in Iran. ABC News and Sports President Boone Arledge decided to run a news special every night until the crisis was over because the situation demanded so much American attention and because ABC wanted to prove itself to be an aggressive news

organization at a time when the network's news was running a distant third. The program was called The Iran Crisis: America Held Hostage ("Interview with Roone Arledge" 20). Arledge said, "When it (the crisis) died down, we were able to do long pieces on Islam and Iran. That's when we proved serious people would watch a late-night news show" (20). Even as the hostage situation dragged on, ABC proved its commitment to serious, aggressive news reporting by continuing the show each night. Ted Koppel began to anchor the series about halfway through the crisis. Arledge explained how he discovered Koppel's tremendous talent:

One night we had this hookup with Vladimir Posner in London, Harold Brown in Washington, and some Republican senator, and we discovered Ted had this ability to keep all this conversation going in a way that everybody followed and understood.

(20)

Having discovered an untapped audience and a talent, ABC developed the Nightline program.

Roone Arledge has called Nightline the perfect marriage of host and format (Waters 59). More enthusiastically, a 1981 Newsweek article called Nightline a showcase for Ted Koppel, the fastest rising star in television news (Waters, Howard, Hackett 75). But should anchors be stars (Zoglin 46)? Does Koppel outshine the news he reports? No person writing about Nightline can seem to separate Koppel from the show. It's as though Koppel is the show. "Nightline was



tailor-made for Ted," said Richard Threlkeld, an ABC correspondent. "It was designed around him like a suit" (Hennessee 52).

But it's exactly Koppel's oneness with the show that proves he does not shine brighter than the program. More than one critic has called Koppel the best interviewer of this age. His skills as an inquisitor are necessary to elicit the revealing, informational, and sometimes controversial interviews that make Nightline famous for making news at night. Koppel is more than an anchor; he's a ringmaster and a catalyst, a moderator, an interviewer, and a cross-examiner. In another life, he may have been a trial lawyer (Hennessee 52). Instead, he's one of the most respected broadcast journalists of the age, a role-model for young people entering the profession.

The idea of being a "star" is not appealing to Koppel himself. "Fame has come to mean being recognized by more people who don't know anything about you...(In my) own profession...(we're) Overestimated, overexposed-and by reasonable comparison with any job outside sports and entertainment, overpaid," he said when accepting the "Broadcaster of the Year" award in 1985 ("Media Courtesans" 18). He further questioned his role and the American state of mind: "How does one live up to the admiration of those who regard the absence of opinion as objectivity?...How does one grapple with a state of national confusion that celebrates questions over answers" ("Koppel:On Values and

Ideas" 36)? Koppel ponders why Americans applaud his ability to ask objectively "the tough questions" instead of applauding the often intelligent and revealing answers of his guest.

The reason people seem to relate more with Koppel (the questioner) than the guest (the answerer) is because Koppel acts as a surrogate for the audience at home. In theory, he asks the questions the viewers would ask if they were given the chance. As a journalist, Koppel doesn't want his views known. According to broadcast industry standards and what the audience wants, reporters should tell the story without bias (Frank 101). The American audience doesn't know Koppel's politics (he is registered as an Independent)(Cohen 16). They see him aggressively question George Bush one day and then do the same thing to Michael Dukakis the next day. Koppel has said that at night people can "turn off the set and say, Yeah, he's (Koppel) my man, he believes what I believe" (Cohen 16). People are able to experience fully the information and revelations of the show by vicariously replacing Koppel. Thus, Koppel's star power is diffused. His much-praised talent as a neutral inquisitor is exactly what enables people to devour the ideas of the show, making Nightline thought-provoking.

The program stirs ideas in Koppel's own mind because he listens (Schine 100). As he has pointed out, "Most people don't. Something interesting comes along and-whoosh!-it goes right past them" (Alter, Michael, and Lerner 50). Many

people would be astonished to learn that Koppel never prepares questions in advance (Hennessee 52). Besides reading a few clippings and writing his opening remarks, he does no formal preparation. Instead, during the focus piece that leads each show, he thinks of the most logical question growing out of the segment the viewers have just seen. If the opening question is halfway decent, guests often end up telling Koppel fairly interesting, even astonishing, things (Collins 28). Thus, Koppel has suggested that all interviewers should learn to be quiet and let the interviewee talk (Biagi 42). The absence of structured questions allows the flexibility to follow up on any resulting revelations.

Here is an abbreviated sample of what Koppel can do. It is from an exchange with Ronald Goldstock, chief of the New York State Organized Crime Task Force, who appeared on a Nightline discussion of the Mafia:

Goldstock: If law-enforcement aggressiveness continues, I think this is the beginning of the end.

Koppel: The beginning of the end of what?

Goldstock: Well, the Mob as we know it today.

Koppel: When you use the term "Mob," what are you talking about?

Goldstock: I'm talking about the American Mob, which is what Valachi called "Cosa Nostra."

Koppel: And you're talking about the end of that?

Goldstock: I'm saying that if the current move by law enforcement continues, they will not be recognizable in the next five to ten years.

Koppel: I want to be sure I understand what you're telling me. You're surely not suggesting--I mean, crime obviously isn't going to go away, so what we're talking about here is merely organized crime.

Goldstock: No, not even organized crime. What I'm talking about are the families that have existed in the United State since the 1930's, and I think they are weakening tremendously.

Koppel used interviewing prowess to lead his source from the self-serving claim that "this is the beginning of the end" to the considerably more modest assertion that the American crime families are "weakening tremendously" (Manoff 41).

The danger with spontaneous questioning during live interviews like Nightline, though, is that the interviewee could control the agenda. At the 1988 duPont Awards Ceremony, Koppel pointed to the January 25, 1988, interview between CBS Evening News anchor Dan Rather and then Vice-President George Bush as an example of an interviewee leading the interviewer ("Koppel Criticizes CBS, Rather During duPont Awards 143). By conducting the interview live and forfeiting a newsman's prerogative to edit, Koppel said, CBS and Rather acted as unwitting collaborators in the ceremonial dewimping of Bush during his Presidential campaign. The top item on Bush's agenda was shedding his "wimp" image, and by controlling the interview, he

succeeded.

Given that Koppel's own program is always spontaneous and live, his criticism had some irony to it. It is his ability to almost always keep control of his interviews, however, that leads most to consider him the greatest interviewer of this age. But in a 1986 interview with Fabienne Marsh, Koppel was able to think of one example during which he was "out-Koppeled":

The example that leaps to mind is diplomat Le Duc Tho in our famous or infamous Vietnam show. The Vietnamese had been insisting he would not come on the program live, that he wanted a pretape.

We kept insisting that it had to be live (70).

The interview did take place live using two interpreters who were employees of the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry. One translated Koppel's questions into Vietnamese. The other interpreted Le Duc Tho's Vietnamese into English. Being ministry employees, they would not pass Koppel's questions on to Le Duc Tho. Tho rattled a nine-minute answer to one question while Henry Kissinger, the show's other guest, sat in the Washington studio furious, threatening to walk off the set. As Le Duc Tho went on and on and on, Koppel finally just said, "We're going to a commercial" (70).

It is this rare loss of control over the content of the program that spurs critics to vocalize concern over what subjects are tackled by Nightline. The program pioneered in allowing Soviet officials to present their case directly to

the American public (Manoff 41). Conservatives like William Buckley, Jr. feel Koppel gives far too much public airing to the Soviet propaganda machine (Collins 22). Such guests have included Soviet journalist Vladimir Pozner, Soviet Central Committee member Nikolai Shishlin, Joe Adamov of Radio Moscow, and Alexander Palladin, the Washington bureau chief of Izvestia, Moscow's newspaper (Buckley, Jr. 55).

Koppel answers these critics saying America is only a different nation from the Soviet Union because we believe a nation is strengthened by a free exchange of ideas (Collins). Nightline has become a true "medium" in that vein. The older meaning of the word "medium" is that it is a conduit for ideas from around the world; that is how Nightline functions (Alter, Michael, and Lerner 50). The program is a news medium in that it presents to Americans viewpoints unusual and unique to their daily thinking.

The economy is another issue that affects Americans on a daily basis, although most people would be hard pressed to explain the complicated facets of many economic issues. Many journalists have cited Nightline's coverage of the economy, or lack thereof, as its greatest weakness. While Koppel harps on the importance of attentive listening, he says in the case of economic stories he falls victim to the MEGO factor-My Eyes Glaze Over (Miller 34). "Financial stories really bore me," Koppel admitted in a 1987 Newsweek interview. "It's a function of my own ignorance" (Alter, Michael, and Lerner 52). When stock-market forecaster

Joseph Granville lapsed into a mass of economic jargon during one interview, Koppel had to confess, "I honestly do not know what you are talking about" (Waters, Howard, and Hackett 75).

Matthew Miller wrote that only six of the 1,850 Nightline shows that ran during President Reagan's eight-year term in office were devoted to America's national debt, despite the fact that 1.6 trillion dollars were added to that bill. Twenty-five shows on assorted economic topics like the stock market, takeovers, and specific industries also ran. By comparison, Nightline ran eight shows on strange animals, eight on either fatness or hair loss, and nine on Elvis, rock and roll, and video during that period (Miller 35). A survey of 51 consecutive shows running from April 14, 1989, to June 23, 1989 (nearly 1/5 of all the shows to be run in 1989), found only one show related to economics. It was the June 13, 1989, episode entitled "U.S./China Trade" which aired amidst the turmoil of the Chinese student democratic revolt.

There are notable exceptions to the paucity of economic coverage on Nightline. Even Miller had to admit that, despite its failings, Nightline has also been the only program to show the kind of creativity that makes economics work on television (35). In a 1984 program on "Everything You Ever Wanted To Know about the Deficit But Were Afraid To Ask," Koppel began with an American woman who had gone crazy with her credit cards, and then got Robert Dole to translate

her predicament to a national level (35). Nightline Executive Producer Richard Kaplan also engineered a three-hour program called "A National Town Meeting on Wall Street and the Economy" following the October 1987 stock market crash (ABC Entertainment, News, and Sports 1988-89).

Under Kaplan's direction, Nightline has developed foreign policy coverage of such depth and variation that no news organization has come close as a rival. In addition to its Washington-based shows on foreign affairs, Nightline has had week-long series originating from both Israel and South Africa, as well as shows from Bangkok, Thailand, and Vietnam. The program travelled to Manila in February of 1986 for four extraordinary broadcasts during the collapse of the Marcos government, featuring interviews with Corazon Aquino and her key Cabinet members (ABC Entertainment, News, and Sports 1988-89). From 1980 to 1988, over 25% of Nightline's programs were devoted to foreign affairs. Of the 1,850 shows run during those years, 180 were on the Middle East, about seventy each were devoted to Africa and Central America, and at least 100 were on East-West relations (Miller 35). Nightline acts as the ultimate news forum allowing factions from each of these areas to introduce their unique ideas to the American people (Koppel 14).

Kaplan points to Nightline's week in Israel in April of 1988 as the best programming of his career (Randolph 44). Of Nightline in the Holy Land, Newsweek said, "ABC News



demonstrated how extraordinary television can be when it forgets that it's only television." The Los Angeles Times called the series "...the bravest, most important, most needed television...bold, historic, extraordinary...epic" (ABC Entertainment, News, Sports 1988-89). The Nightline formats ranged from an informative 75-minute survey of Israel's history (presented in two versions: Jewish and Palestinian) to live interviews with such figures as Foreign Minister Shimon Peres. The centerpiece of the week was a three-hour-plus "town meeting" during which members of the Israeli Knesset and Palestinian representatives faced off on the same stage divided only by a small, symbolic wooden fence. In the audience were 600 Israelis and 150 Palestinians, who cheered partisan comments and occasionally asked pointed questions (Zoglin 74). The murder of Palestinian Abu Jihad nine days before air caused Jordan's King Hussein and Egyptian President Hosny Mubarak to back out of their scheduled appearances, but when it was over, reaction was positive. "There were thousands of calls, thousands--with no negatives," Kaplan said. "You have to understand, we get negative response when we do a program on baldness" (Randolph 44).

Nightline had actualized its motto "Bringing together people who are worlds apart" in 1985 as well. For five nights, Nightline broadcast from Johannesburg, South Africa. One night, South Africa's best known black leader, Bishop Desmond Tutu, and South African foreign minister R.F. (Pik)

Botha debated the issues dividing them, a clear triumph since the two had never really talked, much less debated. Another night, outlawed Oliva Tambo, president of the African National Congress, via satellite from Zambia, debated Connie Mulder, the deputy chief of South Africa's Conservative Party. The series culminated with an interview that included South African President Pieter W. Botha ("ABC News goes exploring in South Africa 86). Kaplan paraphrased Tutu's appearance: "He (Tutu) said, I'm 58 years old. I'm a man of reasonable intellect and I'm not allowed to vote in my own country." Kaplan continued, "It was very powerful. We had a chance to do something TV cannot often do--teach as well as inform" (Randolph 44). Kaplan told the story of one white man who watched the series and quietly admitted to his wife, "I saw the program and...after listening to Tutu, we're wrong" (Randolph 43).

A survey of fifty-one shows from April 14, 1989, to June 23, 1989, reveals that about 40% of the programs were on topics of foreign concern. About thirty-percent focused on the democratic student revolt in China, and ten of those sixteen shows were consecutive-tracing events leading to and during the revolt. Such programming supports Nightline's dedication to news (unusual events) and reflects the show's roots. The program began as a series dedicated to changing events in Iran, and the coverage of China shows that Nightline continues that tradition.

Nightline not only brings viewers rare background

analysis of news stories but also provides unique coverage of news events. Nightline presented a novel look at the 40th anniversary of D-Day in 1984, reporting the event as if Nightline had existed on June 6, 1944, using modern technology (Wisseltier 42). Nightline's novelty continued in November of 1983 when it presented "The Crisis Game," a four-day simulation of war game exercises with Edmund Muskie as President of the United States, Clark Clifford as Secretary of State, and James Schlesinger as Secretary of Defense. Both were critically acclaimed, with "The Crisis Game" winning a George Foster Peabody Award and the D-Day broadcast winning an Ohio State Award (ABC Entertainment, News, and Sports 1988-89).

Nightline demonstrates more daring than just about any other news program on television by undertaking new, often controversial, topics. In 1985, Nightline plunged into a debate on surrogate motherhood--long before it made headlines. The program has also experimented with essays, comedic performances, and historical re-creations. One show even attempted to explain what it's like to be rich (Alter, Michael, and Lerner 52). According to The Chicago Sun Times, "Nightline led the way with historic coverage of AIDS," as well, broadcasting an unprecedented four-hour town meeting on June 5, 1987. The program featured the unique aspect of radio simulcasting, 800-toll-free numbers, nineteen expert panelists, and linkage with more than a dozen ABC affiliates and stations in other countries (ABC Entertainment, News, and Sports 1988-89).

As with any news program, the immediacy of a breaking or ongoing news event plays a large role in the decision whether or not a topic will be covered on a given night. Koppel has charged that Americans' obsession with immediacy and the capabilities of modern technology tend to make journalists measure the importance of a news story by how recently the event occurred ("Koppel: On Values and Ideas" 70). The immediacy that television permits tends to make both journalists and the public lose touch with the context of news events. His concern is ironic since one of Nightline's hallmarks is its quickness and willingness to pounce a story only hours before deadline (Alter, Michael, and Lerner 53). Weeks, even months, may pass before Nightline revisits a particular topic (Cohen 15).

Much of Nightline's value lies in its coverage of a wide variety of news topics in more depth than any other commercial television news program. But some view the show as spending a half-hour today on Angola, tomorrow on the Congress, and the day after on skin cancer (Cohen 15). A finite amount of time is spent on each subject, and the topic usually changes daily. As an example, consider Nightline's week in Israel. That is as deep as commercial television gets in news coverage. Seven-and-a-half hours of news programs were produced on the same subject. One could read the entire transcript and come away saying, "There's a lot of interesting material in there." However, one good book on the same subject would provide much more information (Cohen 15).

From April 1983 to February 1984, Nightline tried to tackle the problem of time constraints by expanding the program to an hour (Collins 30). There are many reasons for Nightline's failure as an hourlong news program. The show often gave a program too much time, jumbled together unrelated segments, or covered less than urgently important news stories--like one show on organic gardening. Then-Executive Producer William Lord said, "By thinking larger, we diluted the focus of the show" (Henry, Bruns, and Redmond 71). Since the show floundered badly in the ratings its first few months at an hour, Lord and Koppel decided to adopt a five-story-a-night, something-for-everyone, smorgasbord approach (Hennessee 54). Eventually, they dropped that format and changed to two main stories a night (one-half hour a piece, again). Koppel said, "...the biggest difference between the half-hour and one-hour show was that after one hour, people walked away saying, 'You really told me more than I wanted to know.' After the half-hour, they would roll over and say, 'God, I wish they just had another ten minutes.' Anytime you're selling a product, you should leave the customer wanting more" (Collins 30). The biggest roadblock to Nightline's one-hour success, however, was local ABC affiliates. When the show expanded, twelve stations dropped it outright and eighteen delayed broadcast time; in all, only 123 of ABC's 211 affiliates carried the show live, and that translated into lost profitability.

Time constraints also affect the type and number of guests invited to appear on Nightline. Michael Massing contends that Nightline likes to select "players" as guests (32). Players are people who count, whose opinions matter, and who have formal, certifiable roles in shaping policy (Manoff 41). In other words, Nightline features newsmakers, the people who make unique or unusual events happen. "Nightline may serve as a national town meeting," Massing writes, "but not everyone is invited" (30). Due to real, factual limitations, though, a representative for every existing opinion cannot be invited. In a half-hour Nightline broadcast, at least six minutes are devoted to the focus piece with another five going to commercials. What remain are fewer than twenty minutes to report on or debate a particular news event. If more than three people are invited to introduce different, often opposing, views in this small amount of time, each view would be brushed over even more lightly than occurs when only two main views are presented. Every news program faces similar time constraints, so each show strives to "get the story" from the principal "players" involved. The extensive exposure these players receive often propels them to an almost star status.

Given these facts, the argument that Nightline spotlights media news stars is negligible. Michael Dukakis appeared on Nightline in a last-ditch effort to save his Presidential campaign. Ferdinand Marcos used the show to

announce a snap election, former-Presidential candidate Gary Hart to confess his sins, and Jim and Tammy Bakker to deny theirs (Massing 30). In each case, the events were news (unusual or unique). Each guest was the principal player of the event and, consequently, highly exposed on the electronic media. However, their "star-like" exposure did not make their stories or appearances any less newsworthy, and Nightline was, again and again, able to demonstrate its commitment to news.

One is forced to concede, though, that Nightline often relies a little too heavily on particular guests. One media watchdog group tabulated all the guests who appeared on Nightline between January 1, 1985, and April 30, 1988. Leading the pack: Henry Kissinger, with fourteen appearances. The only person to match him was Alexander Haig, who, incidentally, once served as one of Kissinger's deputies. Next, with twelve appearances each, were Jerry Falwell and Elliot Abrams, the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America; Alejandro Bendana, a spokesperson for the Nicaraguan government (eleven); and with ten each, Jesse Jackson and Lawrence Eagleburger--a State Department veteran and Kissinger protégé (Massing 34). The Kissinger connection is a somewhat sensitive topic at Nightline (Massing 34). A few days after Massing questioned Nightline's executive producer about the large number of appearances made by Kissinger, a public relations person from the show called to tell Massing that while Kissinger

was on the show five times in 1988, Jesse Jackson appeared eight times. Massing found the comparison a bit inept; after all, Jackson was running for President (34).

Kissinger's link with the program comes into focus when one considers that Koppel came to Nightline fresh from a stint as ABC's chief diplomatic correspondent, a position which required him to cover Kissinger's years as Secretary of State. In 1975, Kissinger even offered Koppel the position of State Department spokesperson. Koppel declined the bid, fearing it would end his journalistic career (Hitchens 452). Koppel has called Kissinger "...an extraordinary teacher" (Collins 26). Koppel said he understands why some people feel he is journalistically compromised by his friendship with Kissinger (Collins 26). How could he not understand? In a 1988 interview with Richard Cohen of Life, Koppel was asked:

Journalists are accused many times of being too close to the people they are covering. Do you think you've ever crossed the line with Kissinger?

Koppel replied, "If I've crossed it with anyone, I've crossed it with Kissinger...I've made sure I haven't gotten into that kind of relationship with anyone else" (18).

The charge can also be made that Nightline relies too heavily on broadcast journalists as guests. A survey of twenty consecutive shows from May 29, 1989, to June 23, 1989, reveals that 65% of the programs had at least one journalist as a guest. (Since every program has a focus



piece prepared by a reporter other than Koppel, that journalist's inclusion is not counted as an appearance.) Thirty-one of the seventy-one guests who appeared during that time were journalists (about 43%). This issue raises concern because journalists are supposed to report--not make--news. If they are not newsmakers, what justifies their numerous appearances? Ten of the twenty shows were based on the democratic student revolt in China. Many of these shows were purely informative and speculative, giving overnight updates regarding events in China since America's night is China's day, and events were just picking up. Nightline, therefore, utilized ABC's foreign correspondents as "guests," allowing them to give reports. In another case, the show's topic was "Media and Politics in China," analyzing how media coverage of the revolt affected events. In that case, the journalists were the newsmakers and, thus, legitimate guests. A final example of a reporter as a guest was Connie Czymoch, a reporter for Deutsche Weller, the West German state radio and television service. During her May 29th appearance, Czymoch was asked to gauge the feelings of the majority of the German people regarding NATO. Since everyone "in the town" could not be invited to express his individual opinion, Nightline chose Czymoch as a spokesperson based on her experience covering NATO's development in Germany. She was judged a knowledgeable, impartial authority, and she was easily and readily accessible to the program. The greatest criticism is aimed

at such "reporter-guests" since their appearance is judged less on their "newsmaker" status and more on their easy, convenient accessibility.

Nightline has achieved a delicate balance whereby the program focuses on serious, valid topics like foreign affairs or the day's top story and still delivers a large audience. That is, as previously noted, how Nightline began. ABC President Roone Arledge chose to begin The Iran Crisis: America Held Hostage about five days after the hostages were taken, saying at the time: "I have not met a person today who wants to talk about anything else but that" ("Interview With Roone Arledge 20). The special filled a desire of the American public to be kept abreast of daily changes in the story. Nightline maintains its viewership by filling other needs as well. Koppel explained this best in a 1984 New York interview:

...there is a fairly substantial group of Americans who are not at home at seven o'clock in the evening and therefore cannot watch the news. And even though they know that Nightline is essentially a one-subject-a-night program, they also know that if something really important happens we'll have it. Then there's another fairly large group that wants something more than they get on local or national news programs at 7 P.M. Beyond that, there are the times when there's a running news story--the hostage crisis,

the Falklands, the marines in Lebanon--when we fill the greatest need of all (Collins 22).

Scheduled at 11:30 P.M. (E.S.T.), Nightline is an example of counterprogramming, a method of scheduling designed to attract audiences by aiming for a different type of viewer than programs on the other stations at the same time. In most places, Nightline runs against The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, The Pat Sajak Show, and Arsenio Hall--all of which are live interview shows based in comedy. These programs are alike in format, and each aims to attract an identical, late-night audience. Since they target the same viewers, the programs enter in head-to-head competition and split the viewership. Nightline, though, builds an audience by offering a strikingly different type of show for late-night viewers not interested in the talk shows ("ABC:Future of TV News 33).

Nightline is tuned in by five to seven million households per night (in excess of 25 million viewers a week) (Randolph 44). In addition to drawing a good-sized audience, Nightline has viewers from a demographically well-defined group. One advertiser, Joseph Ostrow, the Executive Vice-President of Young and Rubicam Inc., said Nightline's viewers tend to be more affluent, well-informed, and, with fewer things to distract them, have a higher attention level. Nielsen Media Research ratings from January 1989 to August 1989 reveal that at least a half-million more women per month watch Nightline than men.

The ability to expose advertising messages to this specific group draws regular program sponsors which include General Motors, AT&T, Timex, Wang, and Sony ("TV network news till dawn's early light" 38). An average 30-second spot on Nightline costs \$26,000, with rates ranging to \$45,000 in some markets ("Change of Hart on ABC News" 40). By comparison, an equivalent spot in prime time goes for around \$80,000, making Nightline a "good buy" in some advertisers' opinions ("TV network news till dawn's early light" 38).

Nightline is profitable, making money by generating advertising dollars, but ABC affiliates are threatening profits. Even as a half-hour show, many affiliates have begun delaying the broadcast of Nightline by a half hour or more. In many time zones, this delays the show's airing until midnight, and at midnight the audience falls off the edge of the earth (some 30% of the homes using televisions tune out) (Hennessee 50). When this occurs, Nightline starts losing money. In 1987, more than a third of ABC's affiliates--including those in major markets like Dallas and Nashville--began delaying the show, substituting reruns of shows like M\*A\*S\*H\* and pocketing the extra revenue they got by selling more local advertisements (Alter, Michael, and Lerner 52). Approximately two minutes of local advertising time are available in Nightline ("Change of Hart on ABC News" 40). Clyde Payne, the Chairman of the ABC Board of Affiliates, said that affiliates like to have Nightline as a programming option because they feel the show adds

credibility and prestige to their stations, but the program presents other problems. Aside from the fact that more money can be made by delaying the broadcast, affiliates can actually lose money by running Nightline. Payne gave the following example: Nightline occasionally runs over its half-hour limit at short notice, forcing stations to adjust their programming schedule. If the show goes ten extra minutes, then the next show (M\*A\*S\*H\*, for example) begins at 11:10 P.M. (Central time) and continues until 11:40 P.M. Any commercials which run after 11:30 P.M. become "make-goods," and the advertiser gets time on a different schedule to make up for having his commercial run so late. Payne estimated that only 10% of the affiliates have dropped the program outright. Most try to "get the best of both worlds" by running the program--late--and preceding it with a money-making rerun.

It is important for Nightline to reach a large number of people because viewership builds ratings. In 1986 Koppel said, "I want to know what the ratings are because if they drop below a certain point, then all the idealism in the world isn't going to keep Nightline alive" (Marsh 71). You can't force people to watch a program; viewers choose which shows to watch. Based on the counterprogramming scheduling of Nightline, viewers must choose to watch the show for its news value. Television viewers who wish to see a light-hearted talkshow featuring entertainment stars like Patrick Swayze, Cher, or Kirstie Alley can tune in to one of

the three such shows broadcast at 11:30 P.M. (E.S.T.). Anyone who selects Nightline for viewing must, therefore, be watching for the news value of the show.

As a news program, Nightline has a great many strengths. Ted Koppel is essential to Nightline's success. He is a strong interviewer capable of listening to the person he is interviewing. He follows up on startling revelations, challenging the guests equally while maintaining a seemingly neutral position during each show. Nightline deals with timely, newsworthy topics ranging from the situation in South Africa to the resignation of House Speaker Jim Wright. Nightline is also capable of innovation, daring to explore topics from surrogate motherhood to Christian faith and the existence of God. The program is also valuable in that it covers a variety of subjects including foreign affairs, domestic affairs, sports, ethics, medicine, and education. Nightline is positively unique in that it is the only network news program which devotes thirty solid minutes to one topic. Alone, each focus piece is at least five minutes long, compared to the standard one-and-a-half minute story on the nightly news. Nightline is more than a once-over-lightly; it is thought provoking, even challenging at times.

The most stringent criticism of Nightline centers on the guests who appear. The show's producers seek to make the most of the show's time by inviting two or three leading authorities on a topic to appear. Nightline presents

opposing, majority opinions. This has the added feature of offering mass appeal. When the planners choose a topic for a program, such as scandal in televangelistic ministries, they attempt to bring to the viewers the people who are making that topic news, in this example, Jim and Tammy Bakker. Since Nightline attempts to stay timely by covering the "day's top stories," the guests are often people who have been frequently seen in the news--media stars. The "star-like status" of these newsmakers does not make their appearance any less valid. In fact, Nightline is often the only show able to draw newsmakers and news events into the public eye and under Koppel's scrutiny. Stated differently, what began as an attempt to prove ABC as a serious news organization has developed into one of television's most successful experiments.

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