

More reporters embrace an advocacy role

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By Peter Johnson
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The "social journalism" that made Oprah Winfrey an international fairy godmother is the new rage in network and cable news, and it's expanding to other media. Increasingly, journalists and talk-show hosts want to "own" a niche issue or problem, find ways to solve it and be associated with making this world a better place, as Winfrey has done with obesity, literacy and, most recently, education by founding a girls school in South Africa.

Experts say the competitive landscape, the need to be different and to keep eyeballs returning, is driving this trend, along with a genuine desire from some anchors and reporters to do good.

In the process, some are becoming famous. And they're allowing news organizations to break away from the pack, as old and new media fight for viewers and readers, says Tom Rosenstiel of the Project for Excellence in Journalism.

"News outlets have found they can create more momentum and more identity by creating franchise brands around issues or around a point of view," he says.

The latest example: *ABC World News Tonight* anchor Bob Woodruff's accounts of how he recovered from serious head injuries after a roadside bombing in Iraq, and how U.S. soldiers suffering from head trauma aren't faring as well because of inadequate government medical care.

As a result, the Department of Veterans Affairs is investigating care provided to soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and says all returning veterans will be checked for head trauma.

"This is something that people in this country need to know about," says Woodruff, who made a huge splash last week, along with *The Washington Post* for its report on poor conditions at Walter Reed Army Hospital. The story prompted the resignations of top Army officials and congressional hearings that began Monday.

In a journalistic sense, Woodruff and the *Post* "own" these stories, which cut through a crowded media marketplace because "people are hungry to be surprised by the content," says Samir Husni, a University of Mississippi journalism professor. "The key is to get people addicted to your content. If you

can't surprise them, you can't get them addicted."

But elsewhere in the media, especially in cable and network news, there are attempts to be distinctive while at the same time continuing beat and general assignment reporting, the backbone of any news outlet.

For example, as weatherman at WABC in New York for 18 years, Sam Champion did what he calls "a friendly version of weather."

But in his new role as weather anchor of ABC News, Champion reports extensively on the effects of global warming and severe weather on *Good Morning America*, *Nightline* and *World News Tonight*, a unique beat in broadcast news.

"We want to do weather that matters, to be informative and expand the topic to help people better understand the climate," says Champion, who unveiled *GMA's* "weather center" last week.

At Fox News, anchor Bill O'Reilly pushes the cause of justice for child sex victims, and he campaigns for Jessica's Law, which would sentence child predators to 25 years to life in prison.

Striking a balance

Chris Hansen's 10 hidden-camera reports about online child predators on NBC's *Dateline* have attracted big audiences and led to the arrest of more than 200 suspects — and charges by critics that NBC is pandering for ratings.

"We have that discussion here all the time: How do you balance what is clearly compelling TV with good, responsible journalism?" Hansen says. "But every time we do one of these stories that really makes a difference, we raise the bar for ourselves and each other to come up with creative, dynamic and enterprising ways to cover these stories. It's a challenge for our business."

At CNN, onetime staid business anchor Lou Dobbs has made illegal immigration his *cause celebre*, and he fumes regularly about it. His renaissance has piqued the interest of CBS' *60 Minutes*, which is preparing a profile on him.

Dobbs is comfortable in his new role: "We're offending Democrats and Republicans equally."

Facts vs. 'agenda'

But Brian Ross, who runs the investigative unit at ABC News, worries about the growth of this "agenda" reporting.

Though not singling out Dobbs or O'Reilly, Ross says the practice "clouds your vision and makes it sometimes difficult to see all sides. You want to be able to report and turn on a dime if the facts aren't exactly fitting your agenda."

There's nothing wrong with trying to own a story, Ross adds: "It's a great thing to find an area and report on it a lot. God knows I've done that with Teamsters, the Mafia, drug cartels and money and politics. I've done all that."

At NBC, *Today* news anchor Ann Curry has carved out a niche as a humanitarian reporter for her segments on starvation in Darfur, a region of the Sudan she has visited twice since March 2006.

"Does it mean something to me that people know about Darfur because of our efforts? Absolutely," Curry says. "The more you do of this work, the more you realize what needs to be done. Our job is to give voice to people who have no voice. I think we've forgotten that in recent years."

Perhaps, or maybe it's because do-gooders are in vogue now. Winfrey, for example, is launching her first prime-time series, *The Big Give*, focusing on philanthropy.

Doing good might be behind what prompted viewers to donate \$300,000 to eight poor children in Camden, N.J., whom ABC's Diane Sawyer profiled on *20/20* in January. Network newsmagazines have shied away from stories about poverty in recent years in favor of crime and entertainment fare. Yet the response to Sawyer's report "has just been phenomenal, from phone calls to e-mails to letters from people literally all across the country," says Bruce Main, director of the charity UrbanPromise Ministries in Camden.

"The piece really struck a nerve with people who couldn't believe there were young kids growing up in these conditions in this country," Main says. "It really personalized and concretized poverty."

Ross says he was surprised to see Sawyer's report get the go-ahead from higher-ups at ABC News.

"It said you can do important stories and still have commercial success," he says. "Diane had the clout to go out and do that, and in this case, she used her clout for an important purpose."

And one that won her and ABC News attention, Rosenstiel says. "You've got to stand out. And you can create a sense of authority in a couple areas for less money than saying, 'We've got the most foreign bureaus.' CNN had the most foreign bureaus, and what did it get them?"

CNN is in second place behind 10-year-old upstart Fox News Channel, which began its winning strategy not by trying to match CNN reporter for reporter, but with a handful of edgy, opinionated prime-time hosts such as O'Reilly. The strategy got Fox attention, which led to viewers, profits and more correspondents.

'Important to society, to you'

At Fox News, Douglas Kennedy's reports on the dangers of attention-deficit-disorder drugs prescribed to children, including an increased risk of suicide, led to congressional hearings.

Last month, the Food and Drug Administration ordered 15 drugmakers and prescribing physicians to warn parents that their children may be at increased risk for physical and emotional harm. "You can be objective and still take on an issue that is important to society and to you personally," Kennedy says.

He began reporting after seeing the effect of the drugs on friends' kids. "If you're going to connect with an audience these days, you'd better be connected with your own humanity and your viewers' humanity. You can't be numb to what's going on."

'A new liberation'

That may be what many news outlets did for several years after 9/11, perhaps unwittingly, says MSNBC's Keith Olbermann, whose biting commentaries about the Bush administration and the war in Iraq have increased his ratings and put him on the map. CBS' *Sunday Morning* profiled Olbermann this week.

After 9/11, Olbermann says, the mind-set within many news organizations was, "We've got to support the nation, we're a vital part of the communications system, we can't rock the boat.' If you said 'The government is screwing up,' that was going to be seen as unpatriotic."

Those days are gone, Olbermann says. "It ain't the age of Aquarius, but I think we have a new liberation from 'Oh, you can't be too critical.' "

Says NBC's Curry: "It's not always easy to be directed in this profession, which can be a profession of very sharp elbows. But my motives are pure. I've gotten to the point where I'm not afraid to say that out loud."