

An Eyewitness to History

The late Peter Jennings revealed his innermost beliefs in an exclusive interview.

By **Everette Dennis and Huntington Williams**

When ABC's iconic anchor Peter Jennings died in August 2005, much was said about his urbane, cultured approach to the news, his passion for international reporting and his deeply human qualities. Less was said about him as a thoughtful student of television and public affairs and the degree to which he understood both the impact of his own public persona and its influence in shaping television news. And when it came to Jennings as an educated person, much was made of his status as a high school dropout and less of the professionally engaged and cultured family into which he was born and came of age. This ostensibly self-educated man's passion for books and learning did get occasional mention, but his interest in and support for educational enterprises mostly did not.

One of his academic ports of call in New York for the 12-plus years of its existence was the Gannett Center for Media Studies at Columbia University. There he gave frequent seminars, attended conferences—often quietly in the audience, not always as a speaker—and took part in after-hours

conversations with visiting fellows, a mix of journalists and academics. There his penchant for knowledge was always evident. Once he called to ask whether he could attend a conference on coverage of religion because as he put it, “we don't do a very good job on that and need to reconsider our coverage.” He did attend and weeks later hired one of the panelists as ABC's religion reporter. At another session, Jennings mused with the former BBC executive Sir Paul Fox and asked the visitor whether he recalled interviewing a young Jennings decades before when he appeared in London looking for a job. “No,” said Fox, “I don't.” “Well,” said Jennings beaming, “you told me to ‘go back to our colonies and get some experience’ and that's what I did.”

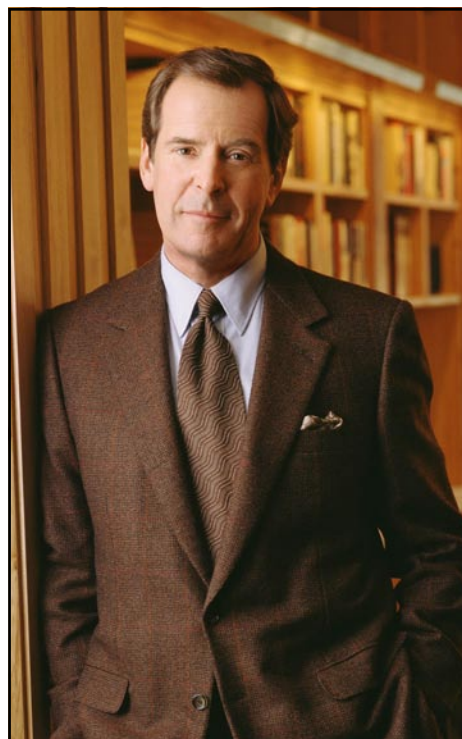
When the *Gannett Center Journal* decided to devote an issue to “The New Media Barons,” we asked Jennings if he'd give his take on media influence, the role of the anchor and television leadership including his own management. He agreed and we GCJ editors (myself and Huntington Williams, III) went to ABC News to interview Jennings on topics he said, he'd “rather not talk about,”

but agreed to entertain. “Given what I do for a living,” I recall him saying, “How could I not.” The result was the interview below, edited to remove a few dated references, but mostly presented intact here.

After more than two decades as an overseas correspondent, Peter Jennings was named anchor and senior editor of ABC’s *World News Tonight* in August 1983, where he had the added distinction of being this country’s most-watched source of live TV news. In the following interview, conducted in January 1989, he opened a uniquely personal window on broadcast journalism, and on the role and responsibilities of the contemporary news anchor.

Q: *What kinds of influence or power accrue to a network anchor?*

A: I think three kinds: you accrue clout which is internal to your network; you accrue influence, in a different way; ultimately, I suppose, you can accrue power, pure and simple, although that’s overrated. An anchor gets clout just by being a symbol. The job has a certain inherent measure of clout internally and externally. Influence you accrue the way I think influence is generally accrued, which is journalistically: more quietly, more doggedly based on the substance. There’s great potential for influence internally if you behave yourself. There is, I think, considerable opportunity for influence outside too. I don’t think we have much external power, though. Our power is generally overrated, in part because we’re in [programs and reports like] Rick Smith’s show *Power in Washington* the other night. They were talking about



Peter Jennings

lobbying, and someone on the show said, “You know what we’ve got to do is influence those lobbyists and those anchormen.” I really have no sense of that. I think that most people court good journalists, and I unabashedly think I am a good journalist—not just adequate, but a good one. But people who court me in an obvious way do so at their peril. I think our real influence on the outside world is in story selection, how we behave in live events, how we position stories in the broadcast, what we put on as news, how much time we spend on the “American Agenda,” for example, on education or drugs.

Q: *Are the corporate leadership of the networks or are producers ever targeted to influence the show on a given day?*

A: I can only speak for my own company, but I think that's highly overstated, as regards my management. People are always writing to me and sending a copy of the letter to [Capital Cities chairman] Murphy and to John Sias, who's the president of the ABC network. Not very often, maybe three times in the last year, letters have been passed down to me, with no comment whatsoever mind you. To give you an example: at the [1988] convention in Atlanta, David Brinkley and I were preparing for the broadcast and not paying too much attention to what was going on. We failed to stand up during the national anthem, because we didn't hear it. A retired brigadier general wrote a vicious letter to Sias saying that he was appalled. It came down from Sias. I could feel his influence, but I didn't know how he felt about this issue. So I wrote the general a terse reply. Sias applauded. I think scholars should look at this question [of corporate control] more seriously, because on the day-to-day basis it tends to become very mixed up with publicity. We were very lucky at ABC. After all, were not taken over by a company that also makes missiles and toasters. We were taken over by broadcasters.

Above everything else, I am an editor.

Q: *Do you ever attend [ABC corporate] board meetings?*

A: Heavens no. I wouldn't. I recently participated in a division meeting on staff changes for correspondents, but it's the first I've ever been to. I think it's not a good place to be. I am not management. I don't have a management title, should not have it, don't want it. I do not want to

be responsible for the hiring and firing policies of this news organization.

I do want to be able to go to my management, as I do on a regular basis, and say, "Do you have any idea how this guy is screwing up on this story?" Or the other way around. I see a lot more of the correspondents' work than management does. I've also worked both sides of the fence, so I often have a better appreciation than management does of what a correspondent can or can't do.

Q: *If you're not management, what are you?*

A: The anchor job can't be described in a single word. In Ed Murrow's day they didn't call them anchormen. A guy showed up and read the news. But that era is long past. I think above everything else, I am an editor. But I'm also a reporter, a producer, a news reader, a rewrite man. I'm an original reporter sometimes. God knows, I am a *talker* — because if you-know-what hits the fan right now, I'm in that studio in five minutes and I may be on the air for seven or eight hours — which means at the very least I had better be semi-in

touch with what the hell's going on in the world. Other than

just being a traffic cop, the part of my job that I really take seriously is getting the best out of my colleagues. All of those jobs, in some ways, are part of the editing process.

Q: *You mentioned Tom Brokaw and Dan Rather. The public has the sense that your jobs are somehow all very much the*

same, just in different places. Aren't they really somewhat different?

A: I think they are. I think they differ in keeping with the general tenor of the [ABC News] division. And I think it's different depending on how one came up in the division. The three different network newscasts can all be radically different on story selection. The reason people say they're all the same is because they see us constantly in this competitive mode on the major stories. Deeper down in the broadcasts it's quite astonishing: the difference in tone, story selection, what parts of the world we emphasize, which secondarily has to do often with the strength of your correspondents.

What you're watching was raw journalism — like it or not.

Q: *In journalism in the past there were times of vigorous, even cutthroat competition. But although you've talked about how you want your broadcast distinguished from the others, at a personal level it would appear that the three of you are, if not friends, certainly civil to each other in public. When [Dan] Rather conducted a contentious — some said disrespectful — interview with [the first] President Bush in the 1988 campaign, was there a closing of ranks around Rather?*

A: No I don't think that was so. First of all, I don't think there is any mileage in one of the three current anchor people slashing out at his competition. We don't live in an age when the whole aim is to destroy the enemy at all cost. But I think you'll find that all of us who were asked

about the subject gave quite carefully crafted answers about Dan and Bush. Mine was twofold. First, I said that Dan and I operate at altogether different temperatures. That's not the way I do things; it's the way he does things. But I also thought it was important to defend him inasmuch as the public watching television gets to see the abuse between interviewer and subject. You never see that in newspapers or magazines. I felt duty bound to say to people, "What you're watching was raw journalism — like it or not."

Q: *But are the three of you then, in effect, statesmen for your public persona?*

A: Well, I think you're all too glib about using that phrase. You asked me what I did for a living; and I don't think there are any statesmanlike qualities about that. If you think you're a statesman, you're up to your knees in mud. You're deeper than your knees. I don't think we should ever be mistaken for statesmen.

Q: *Well, if you're all very conciliatory and civil in public, where does the vigorous competition come?*

A: On the street. Nothing pleases me more than to come to the end of the first four minutes of the broadcast and say to myself, "Those folks at the other networks made the wrong editorial decisions." I pick up the phone to my producer and say, "Hey, we have the right lead." It all comes down to how well our reporters do against theirs.

Q: *You said once that you really preferred going out live to the [news] reader and the dress-rehearsal/performance part of the job. Is that what you like most about [still] being a journalist in your current job?*

A: Now you come to a dimension of anchoring which somehow people haven't yet fixed on. I think it's the most important thing I do. I don't know how to put it, but perhaps when I'm doing what I do as well as I can, which is not terribly often, it is similar to a writer sitting down and writing from top to bottom with no rewrite — just handing it in and being published. That is live editorial television. Anchors are expected to go upstairs and sit down and talk on the Challenger disaster, the Wall Street crash, the State of the Union, Presidential elections, primaries, earthquakes, rape, murder, pillage--at the drop of a hat. It's that one principal example of what I do where you say, "Thank God for the 30 years I spent on the street." And if it's good, it's the most wonderfully exhilarating thing in the world. For example, I know that we did a really sound editorial job on the Inauguration, except for the first half hour, when I was nervous and we couldn't get the electronics to work inside our own building. Everything on the street worked, but we couldn't hear one another inside, so I couldn't talk to [ABC commentator] George Will or [historian] Henry Graff. Anyway, I'm trying to work with [David] Brinkley, and I'm trying to work with Jeff Greenfield, and I'm trying to work with [Sam] Donaldson and [Brit] Hume, and remember what I wanted to say and give it historical context, and have some fun with it. Not to get too serious,

but make sure people understand this uniquely American transition. When the broadcast was over, I turned to our guys and I said, "You were the best," without even seeing the other two networks.

Q: *You knew it?*

A: There is no question. I also know when it's the worst.

Q: *If there is a confrontation between the government and networks — a controversial incident like [the war in] Grenada, where reporters were barred — is it better to have some unity of press opinion? How does that happen, and what role do you personally play?*

A: In my view the government acted outrageously. I hope there's unity on that. As for my role, today we have a "media press." When I first went overseas 16 or 17 years ago, there was no such thing. Oh, there was a critic for *The New York Times* and a critic for the *L.A. Times*, and somebody wrote for the *Washington Post*. People would review sitcoms. But now there's a whole industry out there reporting on ourselves as an institution. When something like Grenada happens, the instinct of some people is to call up ABC and get a quote from Jennings. That usually either makes me run for the hills or sit down and very carefully think what I want to say. It's a good pressure in that respect. There's always the opportunity for making "the speech" on television, but I try not to.

Q: *Roone Arledge is one of the most competitive executives in the TV business. What has Arledge brought to the business and to ABC News? Has he revolutionized it?*

A: No, I wouldn't say he's revolutionized it. There was an incredible shot of energy which went through the division when Roone arrived. Roone continues to bring an urge to win, to energize. What he brought in the first instance was an infusion of money that we'd never had before for news coverage — and access to air time. That was the direct result of the trust which the corporation had in this particular executive's record. Roone also had a real interest in the news division before he took it over. He has been supportive for the most part of people who were here before him. Koppel was here before him. I was here before him. Brinkley came later — and there's another aspect of Roone's vision, let's say. He knew that there was a place for David Brinkley at ABC on Sunday. And he had the sense to figure out how to use Ted Koppel, who has gone on to be an important national asset. And Arledge is a good program maker. He collates well. I've been fighting with him for 20 years, and he can make you listen and fight back and listen and somehow you'll get his point. I don't think he's ever ordered me to do anything. He's always made me see the light.

Q: *A persuasive man?*

A: Yes. That's very important in a leader. Roone is not a confrontationalist.

Q: *There are other news franchises being built up now. What's your impression of Ted Turner?*

We are somehow reluctant to listen to the sounds of other nations... We're really saying that we won't tolerate their point of view.

A: I think Turner's made a very important contribution. CNN is an important new factor in our lives. As a consumer, I like having access to more information presented in a somewhat different way. Different points of light, Mr. Bush might say. But you have to remember when discussing the impact of cable that less than 15 percent of the American public watches cable. Another 15 percent watches independent or public television stations. And 70 percent still watch the three networks. That tends to put it a bit more in perspective.

Q: *What about internationalization? We've got the space bridge; do you foresee a true international market for television news?*

A: No, I don't think so. I think TV can cross borders to the extent that you can now watch the *CBS Evening News* at eight o'clock in the morning in Paris, or CNN at hotels and various places around the world, or Jennings on *World News Tonight* 10 times a day in China.

Q: *But you don't see a random newscast that would go to every English language country in the world coming from a single source under one owner?*

A: No. But if I thought you could pull it off and somebody would finance it, I would want to do it. I really would. In terms of how much you could do — God, it would be spectacular. CNN does a little bit of that with its international edition. But I think we have to make a real cultural breakthrough in America. We are somehow reluctant to listen to the sounds of other nations. And if we're reluctant to listen, we're really saying that we won't tolerate their point of view.

Q: *Thinking of the phrase, "Out of the mouths of babes," tempts us to ask how your own children regard what you do?*

A: People often ask me what my children think when they watch the news. I only recently asked them whether or not they watch.

I open windows on the world...I'm an eyewitness to history, which is what journalism is all about.

Q: *And what do they say?*

A: "Sometimes, Dad!" They are six and nine. By and large, they couldn't care less. I'll call them up if we're doing a piece on dinosaurs or animals, and tell them they might like to watch it. But as a general rule, I try to make it clear to my children that what I do for a living is the same as what their contemporaries' fathers do for a living. You know, somebody else's Daddy goes down to

a law firm or the bus company and Daddy goes down to ABC. It's a little hard to make it that simple because other kids pay attention, but I try to encourage my children that what I do is simply opening windows on the world. Of course, I'm an eyewitness to history, as some say.

Q: *An eyewitness to history?*

A: Which is of course what journalism is all about, and which is why I did it in the first place. If any of my children are going to be journalists, then let them do it for that reason — not to be the anchors, because that's getting miserable at altogether too young an age. Only at my age can you afford to be miserable.

Q: *How would you like people to look back on your career 20 years from now?*

A: Well, I'm very pleased when people say to me, as they sometimes do, "We're never quite sure what you think." I don't mean to be a slave to objectivity. I'm much more interested in balance than I am in objectivity. If you watch, you'll find that I invest a lot of time in trying to get more than one point of view heard. I also would like for it to be said that in some ways I was ahead of the curve, that my mind was on the stories ahead, that I was looking to what was going to happen next year, instead of this year.

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