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## PRESS & MEDIA

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### *How CNN Hurt Journalism*

"The Myth of CNN" by Tom Rosenstiel, in *The New Republic* (Aug. 22 & 29, 1994), 1220 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

When the first U.S. bombs and missiles slammed into Iraq in January 1991 to begin the Persian Gulf War, three Cable News Network (CNN) correspondents, holed up in their

Baghdad hotel room, provided an exclusive—and riveting—description of the attack. As the hours went by, some 11.5 million homes tuned in to the channel once ridiculed as the "Chicken Noodle Network." Saddam Hussein's government had allowed only CNN to have its own dedicated phone line. ABC, NBC, and CBS just could not match their upstart rival's performance. The novelty soon wore off, however. Before the brief war was

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### *Nixon's Final Crisis*

Journalist David Halberstam suggests in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (July–Aug. 1994) that former president Richard M. Nixon's campaign to rehabilitate himself, in part through the shrewd use of television, did not end with his death.

Anyone watching and listening to the television coverage of his final days, from his death to his funeral, had to be impressed by the success of his effort. The coverage seemed to be not merely scripted, but indeed edited by Nixon himself—I almost thought I might see his name on the final credits: Executive Producer, Richard M. Nixon. . . .

He used the immediate circumstances of his death exceptionally well. The death of a head of state and the subsequent state funeral are hardly the optimum time for journalists to dredge up old controversies; it is a time to mourn and to remember, and the doubts of even the best reporters who are called on to comment are, by the very nature of the event, muted. One tends to speak well of the dead anyway, and Nixon understood that. He understood as well that network television people rise to all ceremonial occasions, and if they do not cover American politics very well, they do cover ceremonies well,

and among their favorite ceremonies are funerals. . . .

In addition, I am sure Nixon understood something else about network television: that at such moments there is an unconscious institutional instinct on the part of network journalists—the higher they are, the more concerned they are, like politicians, about losing their own popularity—to be concerned more than anything else about positioning themselves. One can assume, then, that the essential inner equation of ranking network journalists during these days was something like this: The more truth I tell, and the closer I come to the complexity of this man, the less welcome I will seem at his funeral (and in the living rooms of America), and the more I will seem to be violating the spirit of it, and the more the ordinary people of the country will resent me rather than the deceased. . . .

The portrait given us over the final days of a wise elder statesman who had battled his way back from serious political problems rather than the tense, angry man of significant skills—the Nixon preserved on the tapes: insecure, vindictive, raging at everyone and everything around him—represented Nixon's final triumph over his arch enemy: the media.





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over, nearly 11 million CNN viewers had switched back to the Big Three broadcast networks. For CNN, it has been downhill ever since. Only with the O. J. Simpson murder case did the network get some transient relief. In the last year alone, CNN viewership has tumbled by 25 percent. By May, only 370,000 TV sets were tuned to the channel at any given time. More people watch ABC or CBS at 3 A.M. than watch the Atlanta-based cable news network during daylight hours.

Rosenstiel, a national correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*, sheds no tears for CNN. The network could have revolutionized TV journalism; instead it has only diminished it, he says. Although it broadcasts around the clock, its news shows are not much longer than the 22-minute network broadcasts. Much of CNN's programming is "strangely tired and unimaginative," Rosenstiel complains. Not only that, he says, but CNN has contributed to the "loss of control" by other major news organizations over what they broadcast or print. The result has been a general "rush to sensationalism" and an overemphasis on interpretation of the news instead of old-fashioned newsgathering.

Established by entrepreneur Ted Turner in 1980, CNN soon realized that it could sell its oceans of news footage to hundreds of local

TV news operations. Local affiliates of the Big Three then forced them to share their own previously jealously guarded footage, Rosenstiel says. This put local news directors—many of whom had "far lower standards than their network counterparts," according to Rosenstiel—in a position to call the shots as to what footage got aired and what became "news." When Gennifer Flowers's claim to have had a long affair with candidate Bill Clinton surfaced in a supermarket tabloid during the 1992 presidential campaign, the Big Three news divisions, seeking to verify her claim, decided not to run the story that night, but local affiliates decided otherwise: The story aired.

CNN also has distracted print journalists from their primary job, Rosenstiel contends. After the cable network's Gulf War scoop, newspaper editors made sure to have the 24-hour news network constantly on view in their newsrooms. "Editors who watched CNN all the time started to assume that their readers were watching, too," Rosenstiel says. Believing readers had already absorbed the main news about the Midwest floods of 1993, for example, editors at the *Chicago Tribune* "barely covered" the disaster. Falling for the "myth of CNN," Rosenstiel says, editors are giving up hard news for stories based on "analysis" and "attitude"—or, as one detractor puts it, for "soufflé journalism."

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## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

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### *An Islamic Reformation?*

"Islam and the West" by Brian Beedham, in *The Economist* (Aug. 6, 1994), 25 St. James St., London, England SW1A 1HG.

Sooner or later, a clash between Islamic fundamentalism and the West is all but inevitable, some thinkers on both sides warn. And it could be sooner: If the murderous Islamic rebels in Algeria gain power, there may be a domino effect in North Africa—and rancorous political conflict, at least, between Islam and

Europe. But if the worst can be avoided on the southern side of the Mediterranean, the prospects brighten for peaceful coexistence, argues Beedham, a journalist and former foreign affairs editor of the *Economist*. The religious revival now under way in the Muslim world, he believes, could well lead to reformation and democracy, paralleling what happened in the West centuries ago.

It is not the Koran—the word of God as revealed to and transcribed by Mohammed in Arabia 1,400 years ago—that stands in the way of democracy, sexual equality, and a modern