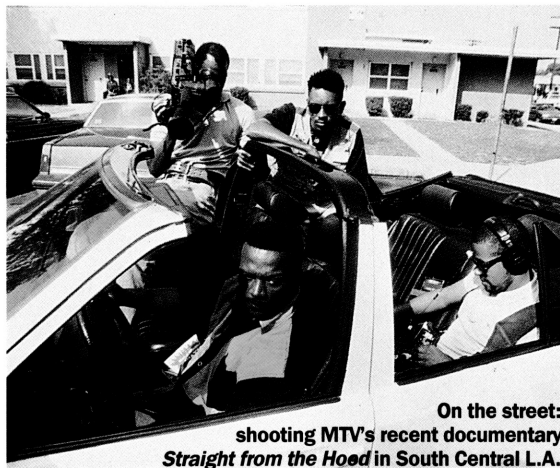


On the set:
ABC World News Tonight
anchor Peter Jennings



On the street:
shooting MTV's recent documentary
Straight from the Hoed in South Central L.A.



New News:
MTV's Tabitha Soren
with Bill Clinton



Sound bite:
ABC News commentator
Jeff Greenfield

men in the news

As the networks cast about for ways to prop up their nightly news broadcasts in the face of CNN and MTV, C-Span and Court TV and the Weather Channel, **Robert E. Sullivan, Jr.**, proposes that the solution may just be anchors away

You don't have to be a media genius to know that the nightly newscast is on its way out. You can see it in your newspaper headlines, as NBC loses its news chief, his desperate underlings accused of blowing up pickup trucks for ratings. You can see it in those presidential town halls, where the little local newscasters are the only ones who get to ask the questions. And you can see it on cable, where the president persists in empathizing on MTV. It all came together for me when I saw a de-microphoned Peter Jennings onstage at the MTV inaugural ball looking like some old veteran telling war stories. I knew then that the end was near for the nightly six o'clock veneration of the great white male; the whole scene had an anchor-at-his-own-funeral feel.

Since the Gulf War, the prognosis for the network news has been like so many lousy series pilots, and the presidential election all but sealed its fate. There was Bill Clinton with Arsenio, Ross Perot with Larry King, but no George Bush beating up on Dan Rather; everyone but the Big Three anchors seemed to get a chance to meet the candidates. In part this had to do with the rise of what media critic Jon Katz first dubbed the New News—what happens when Oliver Stone's *JFK* manages to reopen the Kennedy assassination case, when the Los Angeles riots are predicted in the rap songs of groups like N.W.A, and when a nation drenched in various media finds alternatives to the networks when looking

for its news. More immediately, though, the fall of the network news has to do with the expansion of news on cable, everything from the Weather Channel to Court TV's legal briefs to the mellow morning newscasts that blow in your ear off of VH-1. Now that the death of the Old News is almost a matter of fact, the question arises: What kind of straight news are we left with?

Recently I took a day to tape and watch each of the three nightly network newscasts and comparison shop, to see what they have left to offer. That I have to set aside time for these guys in itself says something about the state they're in; with American workweeks lengthening and leisure hours on the decline, it makes more sense for people to tune in for fifteen minutes of CNN anytime they want, all-night-diner style, than to rush home for the evening news. I watched the same high-speed police chase with Tom Brokaw and Dan Rather, and they both felt tabloid. Similarly, NBC and CBS each had interesting newsmagazine-like features—on why cops get killed and on protecting your medical records, respectively—but in format they were nearly interchangeable. For me, the high point came on ABC when Jeff Greenfield did a humorous news analysis piece about the Senate Judiciary Committee's hearing on Janet Reno ("Are senators biologically incapable of brevity?" he asked), but you can see Jeff Greenfield on a lot of ABC's news shows, and if I'd missed him, I ► 172