

Jeff Greenfield claims more optimism than most journalists

By Anne Silverstein

JEFF GREENFIELD OF ABC's acclaimed news program, "Nightline," didn't set out for fame and glory in the news business.

As a matter of fact, he didn't set out to be a political consultant, a media analyst, a foreign correspondent, a rock 'n' roll authority or a sports commentator either. Those jobs simply evolved around his interests.

What he consistently has been, however, since 1970, is a professional writer. "I was always a writer first. None of this happened deliberately," Greenfield said during a recent telephone interview, referring to the many directions his life has taken.

Greenfield, 46, is probably best-known for his work as a political and media analyst on "Nightline," where he has made a name for himself doing in-depth background pieces; he also is the anchor on occasion. In addition, he has written several books, including "Television: The First 50 Years" and countless newspaper and magazine articles.

He also lectures around the country. He will be at Temple Anshe Amunim in Pittsfield

Sunday evening at 7:30 to deliver this year's Hilda Vallin Feigenbaum Memorial Foundation Lecture. His topic will be "As the Dust Settles: What the Soviet and Eastern European Revolutions Mean to Us."

As well-known as he is for his reporting, he's also known for his wit, fast delivery and

'I find very few people in politics on either side worth rooting for.'

— Jeff Greenfield

ability to sum up a situation in an easily understood yet original fashion.

Worked for Kennedy

Greenfield, who grew up in Manhattan and attended the Bronx High School of Science, graduated from the University of Wisconsin and Yale Law School, and in 1968 began working as a speechwriter for Robert F. Kennedy, who was then seeking the presidential nomination.

After Kennedy's assassination, Greenfield was asked to work as a speechwriter for John V. Lindsay, then-mayor of New York City. There he met political consultant David

"I've never had that feeling that you have to pick a career [and stick with it]," Greenfield said, as he reflected on his work and where his interests have taken him since his days with Bobby Kennedy.

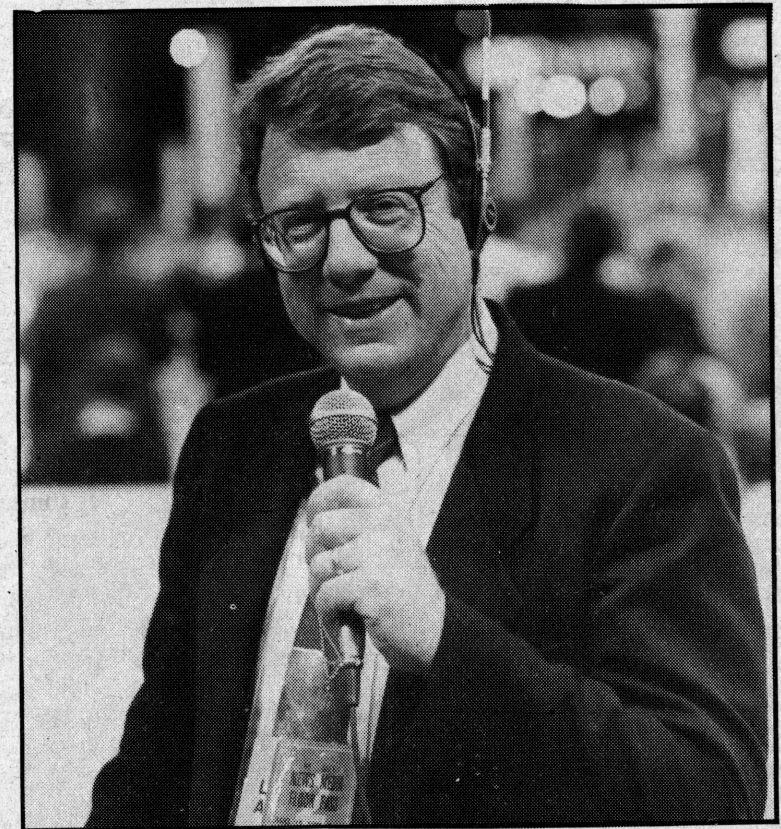
His past 14 years as a journalist have also pretty well clarified his political biases. "I come out of a liberal political tradition," he said, but, "first of all, I'm aware of my biases and second of all, those biases have been tempered by . . . years of reality.

"I don't find it at all difficult not to root because I find very few people in politics on either side worth rooting for. It's not like I have a tremendous crush on somebody out there, in the political sense, and if they were to run for president I would say, 'Well, that's it. I can't cover them. I just think the world of them.' After 15 years out of politics, that's been pretty well taken care of."

Isn't disillusioned

If he sounds disillusioned about politics in this country, he isn't for the most part.

"I'm less cynical than most journalists," he said. "I don't regard the American public as being dragged by nothing but soundbites and ads and canned speeches and polls. I think the American public does a reasonable job of making choices. The fact that I may not agree



Sunday at 7:30 p.m., Jeff Greenfield speaks at Pittsfield's Temple Anshe Amunim on Soviet and Eastern European revolutions.

approaching government. And I think for a variety of reasons, they chose him."

OK, so the American public may listen and make rational choices. But what about the much ballyhooed impact television has had on American politics and the public? What about news programs, with their 10-second soundbites, and the low level of political commercials?

Media impact overrated

The impact has been overrated, Greenfield flatly says. "There certainly are times when they have

has written on politics.

It wasn't simply image, he insists. Reagan's 1980 primary ads were substantive — he promised to cut taxes, build up the defense and stand up to the Soviet Union, with a much more assertive foreign policy.

But there has been a decline in the level of public discourse, "if I may use a pompous term," Greenfield says.

A Harvard University panel he was on compared the 1960 presidential campaign with 1988's, and those involved with the 1960 campaign emphasized how carefully they worked on substantive proposals and how

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political consultant David Garth, who, upon hearing that Greenfield wanted to leave Lindsay's office to pursue a freelance writing career, invited Greenfield to work for him while he began his freelance work.

For the next seven years, Greenfield says, he divided his time between Garth and writing. "And then I looked up one day and I was saying, 'You can't do both. You've got to figure out what you are. Because sooner or later, you're going to have to make a choice. You can't write honestly about politics; some day there may be a client involved.'"

He left Garth and began writing fulltime. Much of his work concentrated on the media, one of the many subjects that interests him. CBS, on the lookout for a media critic, hired him. And that move, Greenfield said, eventually led to more and more television.

job of making choices. The fact that I may not agree with who they have chosen doesn't mean I think that it's an irrational choice.

"I am depressed," he continued, "at what I think is the lack of honest, forthright public debate about issues. I think, in a lot of ways, [among] the politicians and even the media types, there's a certain fear of talking honestly about terribly complicated issues, or terribly important issues like race. I just don't think we do a very good job of that sort of thing."

But what about the American public and its alleged short attention span? Greenfield waves away that charge: "Who has offered them something worth paying a lot of attention to? . . . [Former President Ronald] Reagan, who is often thought of as just, certainly among liberals, an empty-headed actor, I would argue that in 1980, Reagan offered them a very different way of

Harry says. "There certainly are times when they have been decisive," he said, "but as a general rule, the role of the media as a determinant as to who wins or loses the election, or what the country does, has been overrated."

There has been a decline in the level of public discourse.

As a matter of fact, he contends, television has had the most impact when nothing else was going on in the campaign, as in the 1976 presidential election. But in 1980, he says, the country made a fundamental political decision when it elected Ronald Reagan.

Reagan, Greenfield says, wasn't always so great on television, and he has many examples of when Reagan was terrible, examples he has documented in one of the books he

how carefully they worked on substantive proposals and how determined they were that those proposals be intellectually defensible.

"In 1988, you had comparatively little of that, and you have comparatively little of that in public discourse today," Greenfield said, adding that he doesn't know where the problem starts — whether it's the people, the politicians or even the journalists.

"I do think — you can get awfully pompous awfully quickly about this — but I do think the basic constitutional framework of why you have a free press is to just get information out to the public. If the people are supposed to decide stuff, you can't make them read it, listen to it or watch it, but you can at least offer it, and then if . . . they want to make a judgment based on hunches or instinct, that's their perfect right."

And providing that information
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tion is where Greenfield fits into journalism. "To me, what I like most is explaining things to people. There's no term for that . . . I don't write brilliant, riveting prose, I don't write poetry, I don't cover wars in a trench coat and get into the thick of battle."

He enjoys organizing information, trying to get at the "why" of a story, "so that it's accessible to an audience of reasonable, intelligent [people] . . . the idea of taking some-

thing complicated and, without pandering or condescending, using a lot of attention-getting techniques, whether it's clips from old movies, or rock music lyrics, or humor, to try to say 'here's what's going on.' That's the most fun."

"I have been blessed that almost all of my adult life, I have wanted to do what I was doing. I don't mean that every day is a tap dance. Far from it. But, basically, somebody's paying me to do what interests

me and you cannot ask for anything more than that. Now in my dream, would I like to write best-selling novels and plays? Yeah.

"Life is short, but it's not that short. I don't consider where I've been necessarily the absolute answer to where I'm going, barring injury or serious illness. I still have some time. . . ."

Anne Silverstein is a free-lance writer living in Albany.
