



The showdown at ABC News

By Jeff Greenfield

Sitting in his seventh-floor office at the ABC News Center on West 66th street, Harry Reasoner offers a visitor fresh pineapple slices and a few observations about his rumored conflict with co-anchor Barbara Walters. "We get along fine," the 54-year-old Reasoner says. "We're not great drinking buddies, but then there's no reason why we should be." He calls his public displeasure with her hiring last year "an emotional, personal outburst." Did he see her special last December with Barbra Streisand, Jon Peters, and Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter? "No I didn't," Reasoner says. "I was out drinking."

Across the ABC newsroom, in a two-room high-pressure ridge, Barbara Walters juggles telephone calls, short-hand conversations with producers and an overcrowded schedule ("Mary, tell the cancer people I'll skip lunch and just get there in time for the awards; I'll have a cracker or something"). Is Reasoner unhappy with her? "Harry," Walters says, "has been unhappy since the day the new show started; they removed his writer and his producer. I know he goes to the Des Artistes after the show and has a drink with his buddies and gripes, but I think he's feeling more comfortable with me. And if he leaves where will he go?"

Yet, interviews with sources in and out of ABC News suggest that there is, indeed, a serious split between Reasoner and Walters, a split that involves far more than personality differences: Behind it, lies a fundamental disagreement over what a TV news show ought to be, a difference in basic news philosophy. The problem has been developing over the four months since ABC launched its widely publicized gamble of hiring a well-known and provocative interviewer, paying her a million-dollar annual salary,* making her the first woman co-anchor and putting her on with an old-school

*Walters is being paid about \$500,000 a year for her work on the "ABC Evening News," now roughly comparable to the current salaries of Walter Cronkite, David Brinkley, John Chancellor and Reasoner; the rest of her salary is for work on four prime-time specials, to be paid from the budget of ABC's programming department. Walters helped boost the salaries of anchors on the other networks, simply by receiving so public a pay scale. When NBC News president, Dick Wald, was asked whether he'd raised salaries after Walters's ABC deal, he laughed and said, "No comment, but what the hell do you think?"

news broadcaster. And it has now reached the stage, ABC sources say, where Reasoner may seek a "her-or-me" decision within a matter of weeks.

ABC News president Bill Sheehan acknowledges that viewers and local affiliate executives have noted appearances of on-camera friction between Reasoner and Walters, especially during Election Night and Inaugural coverage and during on-the-air exchanges such as this one after a piece on Henry Kissinger:

Walters: "You know, Harry, Kissinger didn't do too badly as a sex symbol in Washington."

Reasoner: "Well, you'd know more about that than I would."

But the real problem, according to sources, is that Reasoner does not think Barbara Walters is in the right job. He is known to believe that her considerable interviewing skills are being misused on a half-hour newscast, and that the informal, personalized style of news—increasingly evident in the new ABC format—is out of place on a straight news broadcast.

Combined with the sense among some of Reasoner's close friends that the format "diminishes" him, his dissatisfaction with the show and his co-anchor may soon reach the breaking point (even though his \$10,000-a-week contract legally binds him to ABC until a June 1978 escape clause takes effect)—soon. At that point, these sources say, if the network does not move Walters either out of the co-anchor spot or off the news entirely (into a prime-time, interview-public affairs-gossip show, for example), Reasoner may well ask to be let out of his contract. And since ABC executives show no public or private inclination to make such a clearly embarrassing confession of failure—"I couldn't survive it personally," one top news executive says flatly—it's a distinct possibility that Barbara Walters will soon find herself without her "senior partner," whose news credibility is considered an important balance to her own, less formal, news image.

This split could be linked to the lack of progress made by ABC News in capturing viewers away from CBS and NBC. While the billion-dollar-a-year corporation's prime-time ratings have jumped from a distant third place to a commanding first place in the last year and a half, the competitive position in news programs has remained almost unchanged since

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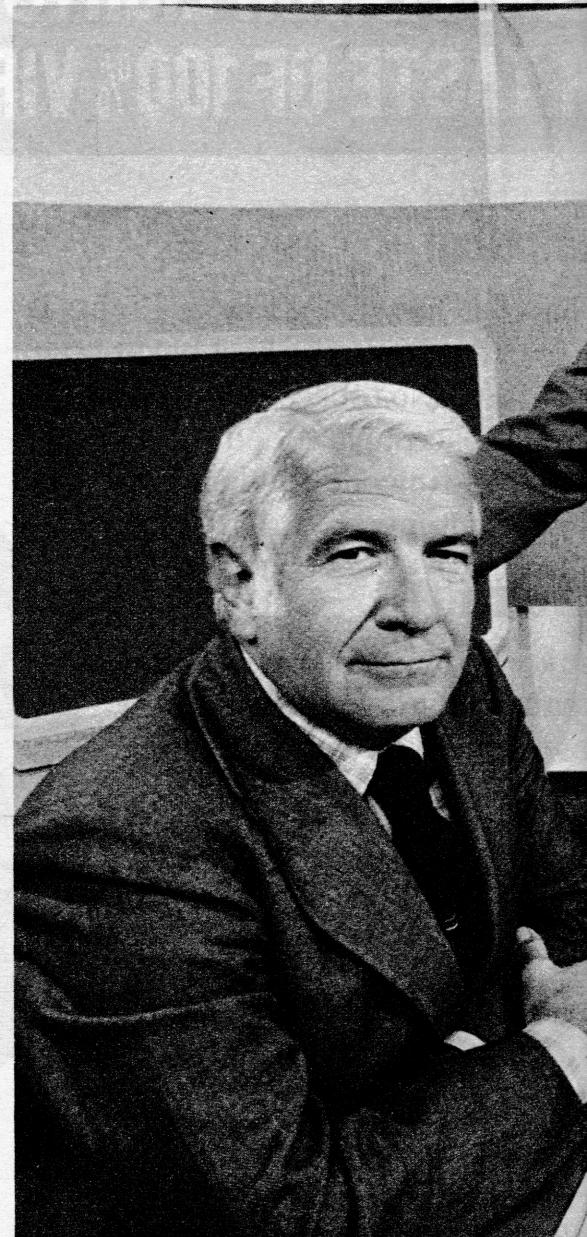
Walters's arrival and the revamping of the news show. For the last three months of 1976 (the debut of Reasoner-Walters was Oct. 4), compared with the last three months of 1975, ABC's rating — the measure of the size of the audience — is up seven-tenths of a point, which means that more people are watching the show.

But more people were watching news in general, probably because of the Presidential election and the coming of a new Administration. ABC's share — its portion of the watching audience—of the early evening audience is up only from 18 to 19 percent, still a distant third to CBS's (Walter Cronkite), which went up from 27 to 29 percent of the audience, and NBC's (John Chancellor and David Brinkley),

which dropped despite the anchor du ABC holdi

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Harry Reasoner, ABC News president Bill Sheehan

which dropped from 26 to 25 percent, despite the return of Brinkley to co-anchor duty. The latest figures show ABC holding at 19.

But ABC's Bill Sheehan says it's far too early to render a judgment. "The Evening News isn't an entertainment program, and you don't expect to turn it around in 13 weeks. We have absolutely no win or bust timetable." And the network claims to have attracted a younger, more economically attractive audience, though Reasoner says, "If it's so, I wonder why our ads for products are to keep your dentures from falling out."

The Walters-Reasoner split is important not only to those who work for ABC or who hold stock in the company. It represents a difference



Bill Sheehan and Barbara Walters

Behind every personal conflict between Walters and Reasoner lies a serious disagreement over what a TV news show ought to be.

about one of the most important sources of information in our society. Forty-two million people watch network news every night. Presidential campaigns are bent to its technology and schedules. Advertisers spend more than \$200 million a year on it. If one of the three major networks is attempting to alter the face of network news, that inevitably means altering the public reality, as it is perceived by millions of Americans every night: an alteration of major public consequence.

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"In television," says Dick Wald, president of NBC News, "the personality—the impact of one person on the viewer—is as important as style is to the written news."

What makes Barbara Walters so intriguing is that her personality is a fundamental break with the traditional anchor role. Apart from the fact that she is a woman, she is, at 45, five to 10 years younger than her anchor colleagues, and has been trained almost exclusively in television, rather than in print journalism, where the Cronkites and Reasoners began. More important, whether by age, training or personal preference, Walters is very different from the voice of restrained, formal authority which is the essence of the classic anchor mold. Her entire on-camera presence is that of a "hot" personality in a cool medium. Traditional broadcast journalists are low-key; Walters speaks loudly, quickly. Broadcast journalists

are unobtrusive; Walters often interrupts herself to rephrase a question. Broadcast journalists are Olympian. Walters, who says flatly, "the days of the Olympian commentator are over," is, in the words of Robert Siegenthaler, executive producer of "The Evening News," "not afraid that she will ask as elementary a question as will reveal her ignorance."

In her "Today" show interviews, Walters often broke convention by asking—bluntly or rudely, depending on your fondness for her—exactly the questions the audience would have wanted to ask. Of Mamie Eisenhower, she asked whether the former First Lady was aware of rumors about her drinking (she said she was). Of Lady Bird Johnson, she asked if she was jealous over her late husband's reputation as a ladies' man (she said she wasn't). At times she could be an outright antagonist: Facing Dr. Edgar Berman, who had once suggested that women were unfit for the Presidency because of "raging hormonal imbalances," Walters icily informed him that she was asking rational questions because "it's not my time of the month."

Even her detractors recognize her journalistic skills, particularly her ability to get a guest talking about what the audience wants to know. (She is equally adept, when being interviewed, at expressing a personal sense of interest in a reporter's work, family and opinions, at maintaining a sense of humor. "Why are you keeping me waiting?" she yelled good-naturedly after he was delayed by a telephone call. "Don't you know I'm a star?") And her definably different personality makes her a topic of interest, if not universal affection. As Stuart Schulberg, her former "Today" show producer, says, "people may have loved her or hated her, but they sure as hell watched her." (Her December prime-time special, featuring the interviews at home with Streisand, Peters and the Carters drew a 36 percent share of the TV-watching audience, unprecedented for a prime-time interview special.) The question raised by her presence on "The Evening News" involves her contribution — her values and methods, her fascination with the human, personal side of the news — to the changing way ABC news is presented.

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"The American news watcher," says Siegenthaler, "is drowning in 'news-speak'—'news Muzak.' More and more news is viewed with half an eye—and TV news is their prime source of information." Siegenthaler and ABC news



Ken Regan

Reasoner may ask the network for a "her-or-me" decision in the coming weeks.



writers and executives are convinced that viewers do not understand what they are seeing and hearing on the news. Walter Porges, the chief writer on the ABC broadcast, says, "I personally hate listening to formal broadcast journalism. 'Prime interest rate,' 'three-point-five-billion-dollar tax cut,' it just doesn't relate to the viewer. We should be able to present the news in a *comfortable* way. I think the viewer is saying to us, 'Talk to me and tell me what happened today—don't *read* to me.'" News vice president Bill Lord adds, "News is not just a scheduled political event, or an act of God. It's consumer news, family news. We've got to be more viewer-oriented than ever before."

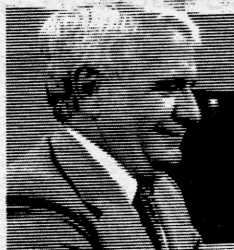
In part, the presence of Walters as a co-anchor fits this desire for a less formal approach. Instead of the Olympian at the mountaintop, Walters is more a coequal of her audience, walking through the thicket of news, stopping now and then to ask what it is we're seeing, looking for human faces and voices behind the statistics.

"We have all-knowing, all-seeing anchormen," she says, "We never ask: 'What does this mean?' and we've got to be doing that." She has attempted on-camera "what-does-this mean?" essays explaining the gross national product, the Consumer Price Index and other esoterica.

"She'll sometimes take a piece of copy," says Walter Porges, "and say, 'Wait a minute—I don't understand this. And if I don't understand it, the viewer can't understand it, either.'"

The ABC effort to reshape its news program goes well beyond Walters's presence. The writing of the show has undergone a fundamental change, with a more informal style. John Chancellor of NBC brought a sense of informality to that network by telling his audience at the start of the show that "we'll be talking about these and other stories," and similar informal phrasings. But ABC's Porges has succeeded in making the news sound like people talking instead of people reading from a wire-service machine.

Before a Ford-Carter debate, for example. Reasoner told us that "Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter spent most of today the way college students cram for big mid-term exams. The idea is to get your head full of the facts, and then practice ways to present these facts with interest and conviction." A Dec. 1 story on the steel-price increase explained that, because steel is a basic commodity, "when steel prices go up—or down—



it affects everyone from companies that build cars to families that buy refrigerators." And explaining then-President-elect Carter's impotence to fight these prices, Walters said that "Jimmy Carter finds himself a bit like the teen-ager who has permission to drive the family car, but doesn't have the keys."

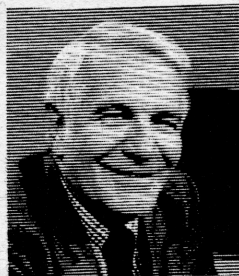
Porges explains: "In our lead into the first film or tape, we try to make it historical—to link it—to remind the viewer, for example, that if Carter is meeting with W. Averell Harriman, that Harriman was Ambassador to Russia when Carter was a teen-ager."

The second major area of departure for ABC News is in so-called "back-of-the-book" stories: features, essays and interviews that focus on areas apart from the "official" hard news of press conferences, statistics and catastrophes. ABC last summer hired several correspondents to develop feature beats, much as NBC's local stations in New York and Los Angeles have done with the "NewsCenter 4" concept of service-oriented stories. Psychologist Sonja Friedman has been reporting on family crises such as runaway fathers and child abuse; naturalist Roger Caras has explained the ecological implication of oil spills; Jim Kincaid ("our Charles Kuralt," as three different ABC people described him) has done "Americana" pieces on horseback-riding mailmen and rural mountain folk making fashionable peasant clothing. Further, Walters has often done short, chatty, essentially non-hard-news interviews with such figures as Hubert Humphrey and California's Gov. Jerry Brown, while Reasoner has done essays of unusual length (seven to eight minutes in a 22-minute newscast) on the leap in Los Angeles real-estate values and the prosperity of the Dallas Cowboys football team.

These back-of-the book efforts have met with mixed

success—Walter's interviews have lacked the revelatory qualities of her "Today" show efforts and those on her ABC specials—in large measure because of the time pressures. When ABC hired Walters, it was the network's clear intention to expand its news program. According to ABC But local stations always oppose an increase in network time—it means fewer advertising minutes for them. (This fall, NBC announced it would not lengthen its news program.) According to ABC News president Sheehan, "It became impossible to have any further discussion with our affiliates about it." So the Reasoner-Walters broadcast found itself with a 25 percent staff increase, with new writers, producers and correspondents, and with little time to fit everything in.

Moreover, the new broadcast is battling the perennial ABC problem of news credibility. As the youngest of the three networks, it has never been able to match the news reputations of its rival. When Edward R. Murrow was reporting from London in the late 1930's, ABC did not exist. When Chet Huntley and David Brinkley were dominating TV journalism for NBC in the 1960's, ABC News was a disjoint 15-minute effort with no film crews and a budget barely 10 percent of CBS's or NBC's. Not until Elmer Lower went to ABC from NBC in 1963 did the network attempt real competition. And not until Harry Reasoner went to ABC from CBS in 1970—for the then-unheard-of fee of \$1 million for five years—did the network get all of its affiliated stations even to carry the network news. But ABC News still has its image problems. The network's lack of profits in years past meant low news budgets; as recently as 1976, just before beginning its prime-time success, ABC was so short of funds that it slashed the "Close-Up" documentary series by a third. And



it still *seems* less committed to news: It is the only network that provides edited, rather than gavel-to-gavel, coverage of the national conventions, the only network that did not clear its schedule for the July 4th Bicentennial coverage.

Moreover, ABC's local stations have traditionally been weak in the news (the local stations owned by the network have done very well in the 1970's with the pioneering of the "Eyewitness News" concept featuring a more informal—critics call it "happy-talk" — news presentation). And network executives now say that a new advisory service being offered by them to local stations will help strengthen local programs, and thereby improve network news ratings.

For the immediate future, however, ABC must worry about whether Harry Reasoner will actually turn his disaffection into a departure. A rumored move of Barbara Walters to Washington—which Bill Sheehan calls "very much in the vague area; it's *not* something we're actively considering now" — would *not* ease Reasoner's dissatisfaction with Walters as a co-anchor. A source close to him says, "It's the sort of dumb move that won't help anything. The problem isn't Barbara's physical proximity—it's much more basic."

His agent, Ralph Mann, says that "we haven't approached any other network about Harry," but acknowledges Reasoner's unhappiness with the format and the thrust of the revamped show. ABC News president Sheehan, when asked about a hypothetical "either-or" choice, says, "If you'd asked me when the show started, I'd have said one thing, and if you ask me now, I'd probably say another." But could Walters handle the job alone?

"I shudder to think of the prospect of breaking them up, because they each bring some-

thing unique to the show," Sheehan says, "but yes, she could." Because of this he says, "My basic feeling is, if it happened, the one who came and said, 'Pick me or the other' would be the one to go."

The larger question is where ABC News will go, and what that will mean to the news-watching audience. What bothers Harry Reasoner is what bothers advocates of the "CBS school" of TV-news; they believe in segregating the softer items outside of the news show itself. CBS now has two prime-time, feature-oriented news shows, "60 Minutes" and the gossipy "Who's Who." But CBS News president Richard Salant says, "You can't distort a hard-news show by trying to make it a Sunday paper. The whole problem with a half hour is that stories become too simplified."

ABC's current news management believes that a news show can be loosened up; that, in effect, after 30 years of trying to imitate a morning newspaper, it is time for a network news show to reflect more of the philosophy of an afternoon newspaper, with more features, more analyses, more human-interest items to complement the hard news. (Ironically, many newspapers went more heavily into features and human-interest stories on the theory that electronic journalism was lessening the drama of their hard-news coverage because of its speed and visual impact.)

The question for ABC is whether the network's gamble is right: whether there is a news-watching audience that will ask less for hard news and more for personal, "comfortable" journalism. Clearly Barbara Walters can deliver that kind of approach to the news; but whether, without the news credibility of a Reasoner or similar figure, the audience wants that kind of news show is a question very much in doubt. ■