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## **“The Future of Newsmagazine Journalism”**

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Good evening. Thank you for inviting me.

At first, I wasn't sure what to make of this invitation. After all, here I am, executive producer of a newsmagazine -- the program that asks all those "inappropriate" questions -- dining with public relations executives, who have to answer them. I felt a little like Jim Grey being invited to dinner at Pete Rose's house.

But seriously, I do welcome the chance to speak to you about newsmagazines; why there are so many; why they are likely to be here for a long time and what to do when you hear that “Dateline NBC” is calling.

The first question. Why are there so many newsmagazines? Before I answer, let me also say that understanding what works on television isn't easy. Ask yourselves this: before August, just how many people thought a game show hosted by Regis Philbin would work in primetime?

Well, if we can't predict everything in television, I think we can learn something from trends and there is no denying that newsmagazines are a growing phenomenon. Back when Don Hewitt spoke to you just a few years ago, there were a handful of newsmagazines. Today, CNN has launched an hour each night; CBS has three hours; ABC has four hours and we have five hours -- not counting the amount of Dateline stories that are also seen on our cable channel, MSNBC.

So, why are there so many newsmagazines? As the television universe fragments, as viewers are given more and more options, newsmagazines are great weapons for the network. They get good ratings against original programs and great ratings against reruns.

Why are the magazines so successful? I think there are four reasons.

First, you can begin watching newsmagazines at any time. The multi-topic format means viewers can start fresh at various points during the hour. And you don't have to have a history with the program. For example, you can watch “Dateline NBC” whenever you want, without having to know why there seems to be so much tension between some of the doctors at County General or why Detective Sipowicz seems to have problems with authority figures.

Second, newsmagazines have great staying power. Look at a drama. Even the best of them seem to have a lifecycle of seven to nine years. After that, the plot twists get used up, the relationships between the characters fully explored. Once newsmagazines get on the air, they tend to stay on the air. In fact, "60 Minutes" has been on television longer than many people on my staff have been alive.

Third, real life can be more fascinating, more compelling than any fictional story. Newsmagazines bring you stories that you could never make up -- except that they are all true. Imagine if someone had walked into a Hollywood pitch meeting four years ago with this idea: an intern, wearing thong underwear, delivers pizza to the President of the United States, throwing the country into chaos. Who would have believed that? But when it was real news, look how many viewers were waiting for the latest twist in this real life story.

Fourth. Variety. Newsmagazines -- Dateline more than most -- have made a place for news in primetime. In the past, news was covered in the morning, at the dinner hour and on the 11 p.m. news. Now, when there is a terrible disaster -- everything from plane crashes to school shootings -- you'll find those stories on newsmagazines. You'll also find inspiring human stories about people who triumph over adversity, who show courage in the face of tremendous odds, or compassion in the shadow of pain and despair.

Some are stories that are truly inspiring, including a "Dateline" story we did with the help of several people in this room. It was about a new kind of wheelchair that can adjust in height can even go up and down stairs ... all without tipping over. Our story included this scene. The chair raised a woman up, from the sitting position she had always known, to a virtual standing position, so that she and her mother could look straight into each other's eyes. It was truly wonderful moment.

Then, there are the investigations. I am very proud of them and think they are one of the most important things newsmagazines can do. One story I produced sent a Neo-Nazi to jail for the rest of his life. Or there was this "Dateline" story: after we devoted an hour to a story that showed how the police were abusing the search and seizure drug laws in Louisiana, the legislature called a special session and re-wrote the drug code.

But if our investigations were focused only on Neo-Nazis and local and state government abuses, I suspect you would be less interested in having me appear tonight.

You are also interested in the stories we do about business and industry and before I talk about those stories and how we do them, let's agree on this point. The relationship between journalists and public relations people is by its very nature stressful, bound up in different and often competing interests.

Some of the things we want to know may not be things that are in your best interest to tell us. Some of the topics you think we should report may be things we aren't interested in. Sometimes, you may want to spin us. We don't want to be spun.

And when we deal with larger issues, this relationship can become even more hostile; sometimes it can escalate into full-page newspaper advertisements before a story airs or full-fledged court battles after it airs.

Add to all that, the perceptions that can be formed or re-enforced by personal history.

I can tell you there are reporters who have been told that documents didn't exist, allegations weren't true, meetings were never held, only to find out later that the companies they dealt with were not being straight with them. That makes reporters skeptical and suspicious.

And, I have no doubt there are some of you who have dealt with reporters who had a pre-conceived notion about a story and no matter what you told them, or showed them, the story came out the way those reporters set out to do it. You know how that makes you feel.

And one more thing. Neither of us knows what happens inside what can appear to be huge monolithic organizations like a big company or a big news organization. Tonight, let me take you inside "Dateline NBC."

Inside the magazine world, if you think we aren't like the evening news, you are correct.

Let me say the evening news is vitally important; especially for people who want a quick round up of the news they need to know for the day.

I worked on an evening news program for six years and I know the drill. Stories tend to be shorter. One minute and thirty seconds; two minutes; three minutes is a huge story. Often it begins with the news of the day; as a producer, we'll call the PR person, do a quick interview, try to condense or summarize the positions as best we can and do the story. Your spokesman appears on the air for a sound bite or two. In the end, it is one of six or seven stories. And tomorrow, there will be a whole new round of stories.

Newsmagazines are different. First, we have time. On Dateline, stories can be seven minutes, or 12 minutes, or 14, 15 minutes, or half the show, or three quarters of the show, or the entire show. Because we aren't bound by any particular format, I may be one of the few executive producers who routinely says, "This story is too short. I want to know more."

The other difference between newsmagazines and the evening news is that we tell stories; stories that have a narrative, with beginnings, middles and ends; stories that use some of the same techniques that all great story tellers use, such as drama, suspense and foreshadowing.

If this seems alien to you, not like "real journalism," not like the shorter stories you would see on your local or evening news, I respectfully disagree.

I see what we do, especially when we are at our best, in the same tradition as some of our best, and most honored non-fiction writers, people like David Halberstam.

And as David Halberstam has proven so often, dramatic stories can be both gripping and provide the larger context to make you understand an issue more completely.

And consider this bit of irony. Some, not all, but some of those shorter, more traditional stories in newspapers or local or evening newscasts are often the genesis for some of our newsmagazine stories. And what happens when we call the public relations person to check it out? We're told, "Oh, that story was way off!"

So in our newsmagazine world, the stories are longer; they are seen by a wider audience; they are more memorable; and there are more opportunities to go into the complexities of a story.

What are we looking for? Almost all stories we do probably have this in common: Characters ... in conflict ... over an issue we care about.

## **Characters**

Unlike evening news stories, most of our interviews are done with two cameras, correspondents interviewing people so we can hear the questions and the answers. People will not talk once and disappear from the story. They'll usually talk at least a few times.

What makes a good character? Someone who brings a sense of intelligence and passion to what they say. We don't have to agree with it; in fact, the more passionate characters you get on different sides of an issue, the better story you get. Then, it is up to the audience to decide.

It does explain why in that wheelchair story, of all the stories we could have told, we used that mother who could express the joy of not having to bend down to hug her daughter and that daughter who cried because she could look right into her mother's eyes. Their intelligence and passion was what the viewers were able to experience the story.

Does it mean strong characters will overpower a story, that no matter what you say, that your company or client will be the loser?

Not necessarily. More on that later. (That, by the way, is foreshadowing.)

## **Conflict**

When I say we are looking for conflict, what kind of conflict can it be? Either internal conflict, something our character is trying to decide. What is the right thing to do? Or it can be an external conflict. One person or group pitted against other people or groups.

If we have great characters but everyone agrees on the problem and the issue and the solution, we have no conflict; we have no story.

## **An Issue People Care About**

So let's say we have dynamic characters, in deep-seeded conflict about ... sorting paper clips. Well, here we have an issue almost nobody cares about. Again, no story. What kind of issue do we care about?

Sometimes that can be obvious, issues of public health or safety. Sometimes it may be less obvious, issues of fairness or equality.

And finally, we need a story line. What do we think this story is about? On its own, is it an interesting tale? Or, does it need to be seen as part of a larger pattern? Is there a history here? Are you thinking it's all over now for you or your client? There are great characters, great story telling techniques, the visual power of television. Is this hopeless?

Not so fast.

Let's play a game. You all work for Corporation X. You get a call from a newsmagazine -- let's say it's "Dateline NBC." After all, this is my game. You're told we're looking into charges that some product made by Corporation X has hurt people in some way. What do you do?

If I were Regis Philbin, I would offer you a chance to win \$1,000,000 but since I'm not, I'll just give you three choices:

- a) don't respond at all
- b) respond in writing but not on camera
- c) appear on camera

Let's see what will happen in each case.

Perhaps, you are wondering at what point in the process we will come to talk to you. Sooner than you may think. At "Dateline NBC," we do not call you on Friday for a story that runs on a Monday. There may be cases where we feel we need to do more reporting before we call, but many times, at the initial stages of reporting, we'll call. What should you do?

Suppose you do decide to answer our calls. Let's see what will happen to the elements that a newsmagazine is looking for.

## **Characters**

"Dateline" may already have a person or people who have been hurt by using the product that Corporation X makes. I want you to know as executive producer, I have told my producer to push those characters, to ask everything a skeptical audience would? Are they really hurt? How severely? Were there warnings and were they followed? Are they sure it was with a product made by Corporation X and not something else? Or, was the product used in combination with something else?

But you, as the PR people for Corporation X, may want us to know other things. In fact, maybe you know something about these characters we don't? Or about the way the case has been brought to the public? Or about others involved in this case?

Perhaps the only way we may be able to truly evaluate what our characters are telling is with information only you can provide to us.

If we understand our characters differently, there may be no story -- or a different story than what we thought we had.

### **Conflict and an Issue People Care About**

Once again, if you talk to us, we can understand if there really is a conflict. Do we understand the position of Corporation X?

Expertise may be required to understand this issue. Some of our producers may have worked years covering a certain field; others may not. We certainly don't know it as well as you do. The reason I say this is to let you know that I have killed stories. Sometimes, very early.

### **Story line**

Another reason to talk to us is to help us understand our story line. Perhaps, by the time we call you, we at least think we may know roughly what our story line might be.

But, I want you to understand there is a huge difference between a thesis and an agenda. A thesis is a theory that can change into something else. An agenda means you are out to prove something no matter what.

At "Dateline NBC," each story has a thesis, not an agenda. Some of our stories have completely changed once we began looking into them. Understanding the historical record, the manufacturing process, government regulations or a host of other factors.

If we are looking at a policy question, talking to us is vitally important. The more information we get, the more understanding we have, the richer a story becomes; we are able to see more shades of gray instead of black and white. It is that richness that I think makes stories better television.

Suppose you decide not to talk to us?

Of course, in the beginning, there is less strain on the public relations staff of Corporation X; but that is only in the beginning.

Perhaps, you think we will go away or lose interest in the story. You would be wrong.

In fact, not talking makes us think something must be going on. We will start digging more and more. In fact, any number of stories we have done got longer and longer as we found more and more material.

Ultimately, you may see one of our correspondents standing outside the gate of Corporation X, your logo in the background, saying, "We wanted to ask Corporation X about items a,b,c... but they declined to speak to us."

It's up to you to decide if you think that serves Corporation X very well.

The next question. If you have talked to us off camera, should you talk to us on camera? You should know that not granting us on camera interview won't stop us from doing the story. We have done entire stories, 30-40 minutes long, even when a company decides not to talk to us. We will try to summarize the points that you at Corporation X have told us and we'll quote from letters you may have sent us. But in the end, it will be us making your case ...instead of you making it.

My sense is that if viewers hear one side of a story on-camera, and make their judgments about that, they also want to hear from other side. I think the audience will be more interested in your words expressed your own way than hearing from us speaking for you.

At Corporation X, perhaps you think you need to launch what I'll call the letter and fax strategy. This usually begins with angry letters from very clever lawyers, threatening prompt legal action and containing other allegations about our character and intentions.

You should know two things. It won't stop us from doing the story.

And you should know that we have clever lawyers too. And that when you write a clever letter to us, our lawyers are perfectly capable of writing a clever letter back to you. What can get lost in all the legal correspondence, is the facts and information we need to report and evaluate our story.

In fact, we are very anxious to get whatever information you give us. And you should know that oversight on "Dateline" is quite extensive. After a producer and correspondent work on their story, a senior producer works on the story. Then we have a first screening, and I and other seniors look at the story and I ask questions and ask for changes.

Then, there is a whole new round of oversight, in which an attorney and someone from our department of standards and practices reviews the story, and the transcripts and the correspondence that may have been exchanged.

And finally, a vice president in the news division looks at the story.

The idea is to get new sets of eyes to look for mistakes and make sure we are fair.

We know how much time you put into answering our questions and we want you to know we are very serious about these stories. We may make mistakes, as all humans can, but we do everything we can do avoid them. We are committed to getting it right.

In closing, I would say this to you: If we do the story about Corporation X, you might not like every word but I firmly believe this: you'll like it a whole lot more than if you hadn't talked to us at all.

Well, I have talked for awhile. I'd love to answer some of your questions although I do want to say up front, I don't know the leaders of Pakistan, India, Taiwan or Chechnya.