# The death of Peter Jennings and the state of the American media

**David Walsh**
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From an objective standpoint, that ABC television devoted virtually all of its "World News Tonight" August 8 to the death by lung cancer of its former anchorman Peter Jennings was rather astonishing. The war in Iraq continues, starvation stalks Niger, the price of oil is soaring, the Japanese government has collapsed—and ABC felt that it should give over its nightly review of international affairs to a man who, when all is said and done, was best known for reading the news. Rival news programs, on NBC and CBS, also dedicated an inordinate amount of time to Jennings' passing.

One can understand colleagues and friends being saddened by such a loss. It's only natural. But for professional news gatherers and commentators, it betrays an extraordinary loss of perspective. The attention paid to Jennings was so obviously disproportionate to his role in American political life. He was not an immense personality in any meaningful sense. How many deaths end up as subjects of entire news programs in America? It's hard to think of a single figure who would receive such treatment, aside from the president of the United States or perhaps the Pope. What does all this indicate?

Jennings was clearly articulate, clever. He was relatively rare in his profession in that one sensed that he knew something about the items he was reporting, and perhaps knew *more* than he was reporting. He had an advantage, he was not an American, and grew up in a slightly more critical atmosphere. Jennings' father was a pioneer in radio news in Canada and later head of Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's news division.

According to the *New York Times*, "Mr. Jennings was conscious of having been imbued, during his Canadian boyhood, with a skepticism about American behavior; at least partly as a result, he often delighted in presenting the opinions of those in the minority, whatever the situation."

Such concerns did not prevent him from choosing a career in American television news in 1964, pursuing whatever it was that lured him south—money, a bigger limelight. Still, he demonstrated, particularly in regard to the Middle East in the 1970s, an ability to comment with some degree of objectivity and knowledge.

As time went on, however, and his prominence grew, virtually all traces of that earlier, more critical edge wore off. The extreme right in the US, of course, considered him to the end a dangerous, foreign "Other." The *National Review* in 2004 portrayed Jennings as a veiled opponent of the war in Iraq and quoted him as saying, "That is simply not the way I think of this role. This role is designed to question the behavior of government officials on behalf of the public." A noble sentiment, but, unhappily, not one which he lived up to.

If Jennings was skeptical about the Bush administration's drive to war, he didn't let the public in on the secret. The paranoid right reads a great deal into the occasional raised eyebrow. Reports he filed from Iraq in January 2005, available on ABC's web site, are entirely conventional and conformist, repeating the official line without question. Jennings was as complicit as any of his colleagues at the network anchor desks and cable channels in the unfolding of the Iraqi catastrophe and all the lies that have accompanied it.

During their maudlin tribute to Jennings on "World News Tonight," his colleagues at ABC referred to him as a "consummate reporter." He was no such thing. A penetrating journalist would have had no difficulty in uncovering and exposing the Bush administration's lies about weapons of mass destruction, the supposed ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda and all the rest. If he had done that, he would have left a legacy of real value.

But if Jennings had seriously questioned the behavior of government officials over Iraq "on behalf of the public," he would not have kept his $10 million-a-year salary, nor received grateful tributes from George W. Bush, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, and Democrats John Kerry and Nancy Pelosi after his death.

One pays a price, however, for this kind of acquiescence and subordination to the interests of the powers that be. He may have been liked by his viewers, or envied, like so many other American celebrities, but there is no indication that he evoked deep affection within broad layers of the population. How could it be otherwise? One cannot point to a single broadcast of his that expressed a deep concern for their lives and difficulties—along the lines of Edward R. Murrow's *Harvest of Shame* in 1960—or revealed some harsh truth about America that led to genuine soul-searching. Instead, for the most part, he adapted himself to the tabloidizing of American television

news, hosting programs, for example, about "The Search for Jesus" and UFOs.

Listening to the glowing comments of his colleagues from ABC Monday night (Charles Gibson described Jennings as "at times, brilliant"), one was struck above all by two things.

First, these were mediocrities praising, in the final analysis, a somewhat more talented member of the same club. What had allowed him to rise to the "pinnacle of success," one senses, was his greater than average competence and interest in world events. In praising Jennings as a giant in the field, the talking heads provided some indication of how ignorant and parochial the rest must be.

Second, the program underscored the degree of self-absorption and self-fascination that prevails in mainstream media circles. These people were covering themselves Monday night as the most important news story of the day (or any other day, if it comes to that). If ABC dedicated its news program to Jennings' death, it was not the result of momentary weakness or mere sentimentality. His demise is a major event for the few thousand people high up in the media. It has reverberations that the outsider can only guess at.

Most directly, a great deal is at stake for ABC News and its rivals: the fate of individual careers and perhaps entire divisions, dependent on television ratings whose fluctuations determine how many millions of dollars advertisers can be charged.

One sensed the self-centeredness in the shocked response to Jennings' death: "One of us has passed away! All that wealth, the best of everything, and we're *still* not immortal!" Those interviewed clearly found it disturbing.

Beyond that, the passing away of one of the three principal communicators of news information to the American public has political implications. The anchor people at the major networks play a central role in the creation of that synthetic product known as "American public opinion," i.e., informing the population what it thinks now and what it should think in the future.

Public opinion in the US is formed by a painstaking process, a daily cycle through which the media fixes its "take" on events and transmits that to its viewing audience. On the morning television programs (NBC's "Today" and ABC's "Good Morning America" in particular) the basic stories are laid out. Often a major government figure will be interviewed. The American people are told what their concerns and opinions are. On the three network evening programs, one is given the official version of what happened during the day, the events are packaged and tied up neatly. The anchor person sums up the day and puts it all in perspective. If a significant event takes place late enough in the day so that the official line has not entirely been worked out by 6:30 or 7 p.m., there is always ABC's "Nightline" at 11:30 p.m. or the comic monologues on the late-night talk shows. By the next morning, the cycle begins again. In this manner the American ruling elite strives to create a national consensus.

The process has been more or less perfected. The problem, however, is that the entire media machine has been systematically discredited by its deplorable role on every major political question of the last two decades.

The evening news programs and their avuncular anchormen, in particular, fulfill a quite significant function. These individuals are not simply talking heads, mere empty vessels. Their job is to hold the country together, particularly at those moments when events threaten to get out of hand in a country so heterogeneous and so internally divided along social, ethnic and demographic lines. The demeanor and voice of a Jennings are meant to reassure the public that everything is under control, continuity has been preserved, the old institutions are operating smoothly.

In that sense, the final departures of Jennings, Dan Rather of CBS and Tom Brokaw of NBC, all within the space of eight months, create a certain nervousness in the media and political establishment. An editorial in the *New York Times* reflected this. The headline, "The Last Anchor," is a play on words: "anchor" as in anchorman and also any object that secures firmly.

The *Times* notes, with Jennings, Rather and Brokaw all off the air, the "power to present the news divides and subdivides again, almost geometrically, into an army of new voices and an array of less-famous faces. At this point, the three nightly network news programs still draw many more people each night than even the noisiest cable programs. And that number goes up in emergencies. But the audience of people who routinely stop and sit down around dinnertime to see the news is steadily shrinking and swiftly aging. The next generation seems ready to taste the huge buffet of news and mock-news in print and on radio, television and the Internet."

America is headed into uncharted waters, without a number of the reassuring faces and voices that in the past conferred the imprimatur of legitimacy on so many lies and crimes.