NEWS
Kids on the Block
THE NETWORKS LAUGHED WHEN THE "CHICKEN NOODLE NETWORK" DEBUTED, BUT IN ONLY TEN YEARS CNN HAS COME OF AGE

In 1980 TED Turner, flamboyant sportsman, entrepreneur and broadcaster, looked into the face of television news in the United States. Like many in the audience, he didn't like what he saw.

"In the [networks'] race for ratings," he said, "their newscasts dig up the most sordid things that human beings do, or the biggest disasters, and try to make them seem as exciting as possible. ... They've polluted our minds and our children's minds. I think they're almost guilty of manslaughter."

With such typical hyperbole, Turner launched the Cable News Network (CNN), the world's first 24-hour channel devoted entirely to news. "I just wanted to see if we could do it—like Christopher Columbus," said Turner, who as a yachtsman had won the America's Cup. "When you do something that's never been done before, sail on uncharted waters and don't know where you're going, you're not sure what you're going to find when you get there, but at least you're going somewhere."

The broadcast networks couldn't have known that Ted Turner would become today's William Paley. Their big boys regarded Turner as the clown prince of news and labeled CNN the "Chicken Noodle Network." They should have called it the "Chicken Little Network," because the networks' owned-and-operated sky would soon begin to fall—in the form of declining ratings and sinking profits.

A decade after its debut, CNN has wired the world and assumed a dominant position in the international news market. It has 23 bureaus to assemble information that is transmitted to some 90 countries. It has been described as the Associated Press of television news—not bad for the new kid on the block. With such shows as Crossfire and Moneyline, CNN has brought political debate and expanded financial news coverage to prime time and presented us with long-form programs beyond the sound bite.

When important international news is breaking, people often turn to

BY JOAN KONNER
CNN first. Its viewers are not only ordinary citizens hungry for a news fix, they are world leaders and young revolutionaries, financiers and academics. Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev, François Mitterrand, Fidel Castro and King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, among others, are reported to watch CNN in their offices, with a translator if necessary. George Bush ordered the invasion of Panama, then received his half-hourly briefings by watching CNN. In the global village, the village green is the television screen tuned to CNN.

It has also influenced journalism, and with it the world. We watch and we wonder: How much can we attribute the collapse of communism and the movement toward democracy to the effect of television news that is beamed all over the world?

We might also view other recent, momentous events in world history—the uprising in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, the release of Nelson Mandela and the first glimmers of liberalization in South Africa—and wonder if the free American press, in particular television news and CNN, is not only reporting reality but helping to create a new one.

Spiritual leaders through the ages have given us the word: The world is one community. By crossing the borders of differing ideologies, CNN has become a manifestation of that message and is helping to make the vision come true.

Joan Konner is the dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, publisher of the ‘Columbia Journalism Review’ and a member of the Pulitzer Prize board.
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