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Our Top Story Tonight: 25 Years Ago, Network News Changed Forever

Cry, Wolf
An irreverent look at the people and events that keep us up at night

THIS MONTH IN PR/MARKETING
BY JEFF RODRIGUEZ

It happened at 5 p.m. June 1 with the birth of the nation’s first 24-hour news network, CNN. For those PR pros who have never used a typewriter, the different back then. There were only three major networks, and the news was presented in nightly 30-minute broadcasts. The idea of a station delivering news around the clock was crazy, unthinkable — like a store opening early the day after Thanksgiving. Oh. Never mind.

CNN debuted with an introduction from the man (and money) behind it. “We and we will cover the end of the world, live, and that will be our last event.” Anchoring that first broadcast were husband and wife team. Turner, already on his second marriage, should have known better than to put a married couple in front of the camera, but perhaps he had no choice, as the CNN team consisted of only about 200 employees. Besides, Hart and Walker were reputable journalists, and their first story was a solid piece on the attempted assassination of civil rights activist.

Despite the promising start, however, the fledgling network struggled. CNN initially lost money and, in a jab at Turner’s southern roots, was derided as the “Chicken Noodle Network.” But Turner kept adding staff and opening bureaus, and in 1983 he bought the Satellite News Channel, shutting down a key competitor.

is CNN voice-over would become iconic (who’s going to argue with Darth Vader?). The other asset was all the incredible news that was about to happen. In 1986, CNN carried the only live coverage of the space shuttle Challenger explosion; a year later, when a toddler named fell into a well in a town called Midland, the network provided coverage that was in-depth, so to speak. And when the Sept. 11 attacks occurred, CNN broke the story.

While other network anchors were still in the morning meetings. CNN’s anchors were reporting the news. Slowly, the Chicken Noodle Network was becoming the meat-and-potatoes station.

And then came 1991 and the Persian Gulf War. When the aerial assault on Baghdad began, all of the networks reported on it — but CNN was the only network to report on it and the news team being limited to an audio feed heightened the drama. Bolstering the coverage was the recently hired credentialed character with clearly the greatest television name ever.

and our government leaders noted its impact. The influence of continuous news on foreign policy even prompted Pentagon officials to coin a term: “the CNN effect.”

So the story should end, “And today, CNN has a statue in the News Hall of Fame and more awards than the Grammys.” Except:

House majority leader, accused the network of being biased, calling it the Clinton News Network (in the next decade independent researchers would confirm some instances of bias). And in 1996, both Fox News and MSNBC appeared on the scene.

By the 2000s, viewership began to taper, and more recently it has plummeted. To compensate, CNN data boards now consume an entire wall or floor, flying pie charts bombard the viewer, and the Iowa caucus gets illustrated with graphics that peg from The Game of Life.

When Malaysian Flight 370 disappeared, CNN created an airplane cockpit simulator and put reporter Martin Savidge inside. Desperate for news, the network did a story on how many hours Savidge spent covering the story, resulting in the Twitter hashtag #FreeMartinSavidge. And the guy sitting next to Savidge pretending to be the pilot got a Twitter account for his plaid shirt.