

Journalists become 'self-reverential' celebrities

Jennifer Harper | Wednesday, December 3, 2008

Newsmen have become the news. And the gossip.

One may run for office. Many are vying for a single plum job. Another is suing his old network for millions. It is a long way from the austere days of Eric Sevareid, when staid anchormen left stardom to Hollywood.

"Anchors and journalists have become part of self-reverential celebrity culture. Everything goes back to 'me.' It's driven somewhat by technological and economical change. Still, I haven't seen them pulled kicking and screaming into this," said Robert Lichter, director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University.

"Anchors can be bigger stars than the nominees at a political convention. They're not only brand names, but whole mini-corporations who supply the news, tell us what it means, and then turn around and be news themselves," he added.

Some 600 news stories have appeared, for example, on the rumor that MSNBC's [Chris Matthews](#) is mulling a run for Senate in 2010, to oppose Sen. Arlen Specter, Pennsylvania Republican. A former aide to House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr. and a speechwriter for President Carter, Mr. Matthews has firmly denied it. So has his network.

Yet phase two of the news cycle is in motion as analysts chime in.

Phil Singer, a communications director for Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton's presidential campaign, questioned the ethics.

"When one of the network's most visible anchors is reported to be exploring a run for elected office, the network has an obligation to remove that person from its airwaves," he wrote in a blog.

Radio Business Report said that Mr. Matthews was "moving from pundit to target."

NBC's [David Gregory](#), meanwhile, has starred in an ongoing soap opera centered on "Meet the Press," the network's top-rated Sunday talk show, which draws 4.5 million viewers. It has been without a permanent moderator since the death of longtime host Tim Russert in June.

Mr. Gregory is in the running, along with interim host Tom Brokaw and other reported hopefuls that include Ted Koppel, Gwen Ifill, Katie Couric, Chuck Todd, Andrea Mitchell, Keith Olbermann, Judy Woodruff and even the aforementioned Mr. Matthews.

An online poll at MediaBistro.com -- an insiders' journalism blog -- found that 79 percent of the respondents thought it would be a "bad idea" if NBC chose Mr. Gregory as moderator. The Drudge Report referred to the events as "meet the depressed," calling the 60-year-old public-affairs show - the nation's longest-running TV program - a "fading format."

Should a woman be chosen, she would be only the second female in the coveted post. Martha Rountree, who helped create the show, hosted it from 1947 to 1953.

Meanwhile, former CBS newsmen [Dan Rather](#) is continuing his \$70 million lawsuit against his old network, charging that CBS violated his contract and compromised the investigation of a "60 Minutes" segment that falsely claimed President Bush compromised his Vietnam-era military service.

Mr. Rather is also the subject of much press, not all of it good. Sam Dealey of U.S. News and World Report called the legal tussle a "vanity lawsuit," while Edward Wasserman of the Minneapolis Star-Tribune observed, "Dan Rather may be the mainstream media-haters' favorite piñata, but that doesn't mean he gets any respect from the mainstream media."

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