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Broadcast Journalists: Brains...and Beauty?

On average, 208 million viewers will tune into an ABC News program on a monthly basis according to Disney-ABC's website. Interestingly enough, the anchors viewers will see reporting the headlines of the day will be clad in perfectly pressed suits, complemented by just-so hairstyles. And, maybe they'll be credentialed, and maybe not, but measly facts such as reliability do not diminish the value of a pearly white smile and an acne-free complexion. Body image and fashion sense have become requirements for on-air time and routine in the hiring practices of network news employees. It has become apparent America is a society ruled by the notion thin and blonde are the only justifications for feeling any sense of self-worth. And, if a person isn't at least one of the two, he or she is not worthy of fame or success.

However, those individuals in the broadcast journalism industry that reach 208 million people a month are no longer required to just have a college degree or a sense of intellect, they must now be beautiful and attain celebrity status. Physical attractiveness has been an idea plaguing the minds of societies since evolution has been an idea being discussed. Peg Zeplin Brand delves into the ugly history of beauty myths in her book *Beauty Matters*. According to Brand, Plato was one of the first philosophers to discuss the topic and "linked beauty with love: first, the love of a beautiful body, and then, the beauty of one's soul...the beauty of knowledge" (8). So, reflecting on Plato's

idea of beauty, readers can infer beauty of the body has always, and probably will always, come before finding the heart or mind beautiful.

Broadcast journalists though walk a fine line between serious journalist and talking head. They are required to be academically accredited but must also arrive hours before going on the air to ensure they get into hair and make-up on time. They are expected to hold credibility through experience while still entertaining viewers with coy comments on current affairs. They must be articulate, yet also attractive. When referring to attractiveness, I'm not talking about being well dressed or clean-shaven, I'm referring to being model worthy. These anchors live in a world where beauty and brains are equally important to receive camera time. Academic success should not be rapidly fading into oblivion in exchange for being more physically appealing and network news executives should not use beauty as a credential for on-air time.

I have always been a huge fan of *Good Morning America*, maybe because my parents watched it religiously when I was growing up and it's the only morning cable news show I knew for a long time. I always loved Joan Lunden and Charles Gibson and when Lunden left, ABC found another pretty blonde to replace her, Diane Sawyer. Sawyer, a former beauty queen can be categorized as gorgeous. She and Gibson had great chemistry on air until Gibson's departure in the summer of 2006, and they were both uncommonly good-looking, even for being middle-aged. And, they looked credible in their power color button-down's, complemented by a squeaky-clean smile. And, so the question remains: were they hired simply based on good looks that came from good genetics, or were they hired on the merit of their credentials and journalistic experience?

The only individuals who can accurately answer the question are the network executives who hire the reporters who become their news program's star anchors. News execs invest millions of dollars into news programming and it makes perfect sense because it's cheaper to build a set for a weather report than it is to construct an entire town for an hour-long drama, which may or may not make it past the first couple of episodes. As *Time* magazine states, "Prime-time news programming is becoming more desirable because it costs only about half as much to produce as entertainment fare" (Zoglin 4). The anchors of these programs are what set them apart from the competitors in the same time slot. Viewers will still tune in during primetime for the headlines of the day. Since it's the same day with the same bulleted news items at CBS, ABC, and NBC the only choice viewers make is whether to watch Katie Couric, Charlie Gibson, or Brian Williams—decisions, decisions.

And, it's not just the nightly news programming becoming increasingly infatuated with good-looks; morning air waves feature former beauty queens, like Diane Sawyer. These anchors are made to look like they just finished up a photo shoot, even though it's the ungodly hour of 6AM. *Time* magazine ran an article that shows how Sawyer has always been revered as an entertainer in the news world, whether relaying her perils during an investigative report or conveying the headlines of the day. Columnist Richard Zoglin described Sawyer in the following way: "As a reader of the news, she is masterly: businesslike but warm, her eyes now wide with the drama of the day, now crinkling ever so slightly with concern...[she] doesn't just deliver the news, she performs it" (1). So, a television news anchor can be described as a "performer" but not as credentialed, impressive, intelligent, and unfaltering? Those adjectives seem to no longer be as eye-

catching to readers because they're uninterested in anything that isn't fabricated, and filled with, well...newsworthy prose.

And, it's not just the readers of *Time*; the viewers of Sawyer's morning news show have begun to lose sight of the real purpose of the show, if they can even see it at all anymore. To prove my point, I went in search of a video clip on *Good Morning America's* website, and lo and behold if I didn't find one that fit this specific purpose. There is a segment aired daily entitled, "Around the Water Cooler" where viewers can ask a question, any question they'd like, to a kiosk outside of the New York City studio. Two viewers, one male and one female, asked the anchors of their respective sexes, how they managed to stay so good-looking throughout the duration of the broadcast. Colleen Lenning of Florida asked Diane Sawyer and Robin Roberts, "How do you keep your teeth so white, and also, while you're on camera, how you keep the lipstick from rubbing off on your teeth?" Sawyer answered first referring to the "buddy system" going on to explain how she and Roberts constantly check one another during the broadcast and indicate any stains on one another's teeth. Roberts followed with, "Yeah, we do that constantly throughout the morning" ("Around..."). These two accomplished anchors, who have interviewed presidents of corporations and countries, are worried about stains on their teeth. Well, it's nice to see they help one another out, because in all honesty they couldn't very well ask Presidents Clinton or Bush.

A male viewer, Nicholas Gumaz, posed a question to the two male anchors, Chris Cuomo and Sam Donaldson "How do you guys keep your hair looking so good on the show?" Cuomo, chuckling, answered, "It doesn't look this way when I walk in here in the morning and there's a great group of people that make us look this way every morning"

(“Around...”). It isn’t absurd to think that men and women in the public eye must concern themselves with their physical appearances, but it shouldn’t be a journalist’s prerogative, who’s sole purpose should be concerning the most important stories of the day, such as bombings in Baghdad or a child gone missing. And yet, network news execs make it a point to hire an entire team of hairstylists and make-up artists to ensure their star anchors look beautiful. Even Sawyer has said she feels frustrated with how she is viewed, more as a celebrity than a serious reporter. “I’m not sure that we make a distinction between news people and celebrities. And I think there is a distinction” (Zoglin 9). She feels the attention she receives thanks to her newfound “star power” is irrelevant, and should be so to her viewers as well.

But, it’s not irrelevant to her bosses; to them it’s quite the contrary. According to *Time* magazine, stars are paid their worth. “Stars draw viewers, and that means higher ratings and higher ad revenues for the network...the crucial question, however, is not whether news stars deserve the money but whether they deserve the stature.” Stature comes with fans, or in this case being able to draw viewers. Americans will tune in to a story that may have once seemed trivial, but now Charlie Gibson or Katie Couric are on the scene, making it a story of obvious importance. And, this makes news executives very happy.

And in journalists own defense, “they must be able not only to report the news but to communicate it effectively. An appealing on-camera demeanor is no less important than a writer’s prose style or a magazine layout” (Zoglin 5). But those same prose styles or layouts do not have to answer to a camera and an industry that no longer just demands brains...but beauty, too.

Back to Diane Sawyer for a moment: her credentials are impressive, more impressive than some of her colleagues perhaps, but she came into the journalism industry rather late. According to her biography on *Good Morning America's* website, she attended Wellesley College where she received her B.A. in English. She attended one semester of law school, and then decided she wanted to become a journalist. Her father helped her land a job in the White House Communications Office, during Nixon's administration, whom she impressed by writing a piece about the sitting president. Nixon in turn "dubbed her 'the smart girl'" (Zoglin 6). She then went on to assist the former president write his personal memoirs before his death in 1994. Looking at this segment of her career, she didn't cover any hard stories or conduct any sort of investigative, risky leads- her resume may have been impressive, but not in the field of journalism. She was also an America Junior Miss, which is showcased in just about any article or segment run on her life. However, what isn't commonly known is what her talent was: "reading an original poem about the Civil War and singing songs representing the North and South" (Zoglin 6). Even then, she was more concerned with showcasing her intellect, rather than her figure and beauty.

And, she wasn't always considered such a beautiful girl. A story run on her show in September 2006 explained how she too experienced geeky moments in school, because she's just like the rest of us, except now she has a hair and make-up team. The story said, "In high school, many people saw [Sawyer] as a brain more than a beauty." Her clothing styles lacked, "coke-bottle glasses [were] her accessory of choice [and] her shiny blonde locks weren't so shiny back then" ("Diane..." 1). So, the viewer can infer from the vocabulary used in this narrative, if Sawyer still looked the way she did back in high

school at present, she wouldn't be the co-anchor of *Good Morning America*. And, the length to which viewers would care if the story had been run on her impressive list of interviews over the years could probably be measured the same length of a centipede. "We welcome them into our living rooms and dens as if they're old friends. In truth, we often spend more time with them than we do with relatives and neighbors" (Fensch 155). And, the truth is: we know nothing about them, and we don't care.

The problem remains in regards as to what can be done to prevent the hiring practices of Barbie and Ken stereotypes to fill primetime news slots. Like any looming problem where every solution seems to be a double-edge sword, it's crucial to start small, in this case, field correspondents. For instance, Floridians face hurricane season every summer or really anytime rain reaches our forecast, so we're used to seeing reporters covering these brutal weather trends. Typically, as concerned viewers, we're not focused on the correspondent's attire or if the hair and make-up team has done an adequate job of preparing the reporter for airtime. If examined closely, these correspondents rarely look halfway decent, which is logical because there's a category three or four storm barreling down on them. We as viewers need up-to-the-minute information on where the storm is headed next; therefore we will still tune in and listen to the individual, who would never be caught dead appearing so unkempt behind the news desk. Important stories call for serious reporters who are earnest in their reporting tactics, somber in their reflections, and above all- realistic in their appearance. In times of confusion we call on those individuals we can trust, and trustworthiness shines through in journalists who look like the girl or guy next door. Network executives may rest assured their viewers will continue tuning in, even if every anchor and correspondent isn't a former beauty pageant title-holder. News

that is newsworthy needs to be heard, regardless of the attractiveness of the person reporting.

Eventually, the ideal image of a correspondent can and will change, and news desk anchors can begin the process of detoxifying their pores with heavy make-up and save the ozone with a few less cans of hairspray, and it's a good start, but not enough. Now the task to tackle lies in showcasing primetime anchors' academic accreditations. These men and women have worked hard to achieve the stature of being a household name and Nielsen ratings favorite; they've certainly earned the right to brag a bit. On a semi-annual basis, each primetime and morning news program should run a segment highlighting the accomplishments of the network's star anchors. Every six months is a decent amount of time because it's short enough to recap and people will still remember the stories, yet long enough so people won't relive the moments, but rather appreciate the coverage the journalists provided them.

We've recently seen news slots dominated by a celebrity icon's death and her daughter's DNA under scrutiny; the power of Congress switch sides of the aisle; the U.S. Attorney General's job in question; a TV personality fired over racist and sexist comments; a dictator hanged; the death of a beloved president; the deadliest shooting incident in U.S. history in the form of a campus massacre; not to mention the daily tragedies and diplomatic developments in the Middle East. And that's just to mention the past few weeks, so imagine the multitude of stories covered in the span of six months. And, these stories were presented to us by dedicated journalists who never faltered in their pursuit of a lead; never stopping until questions were answered. They deserve to

have their hard work displayed, if nothing else than to remind America why they tuned in and what these infamous reporters are really trying to do in the course of their jobs.

This year, 39.9 million Americans watched men and women of Hollywood accept the most prestigious award an entertainer can receive, the Oscars (more commonly referred to as the Academy Awards) (“Seinfeld...”). However, when journalists are bestowed with Lifetime Achievement Awards, Kennedy Honors, or even Pulitzer Prizes, these ceremonies don’t make it to the airwaves. Some might argue if the award shows were broadcast, this might make reporters seem reminiscent of celebrities and diminish the value of their work. Nevertheless, broadcasters should still be afforded the same courtesies as their iconic counterparts on the Western coast.

We invite these men and women into our homes on a daily basis, while only venturing to the box office when the mood strikes to see an Academy Award winner’s face splashed across the big screen. Yet, society is more enthralled in who receives an award for a movie they may or may not have seen while reluctant to witness a broadcast journalist acknowledged for a segment on global warming or an investigative piece where life and limb may have been in jeopardy. If award ceremonies for journalism were aired, America would realize there is so much more to a news anchor’s job than a 4 AM call for hair and make-up.

The vast majority of successful journalists today have attended college, some even beyond, and it isn’t exactly easy to accomplish all they have. If more stories were run on shows they anchor about their schools and achievements listed on their resumes, society would find a whole new respect for the faces they watch over the rim of their coffee cups in the morning.

When Charlie Gibson signed off from *Good Morning America* for the last time in the summer of 2006, viewers were reminded of everything he had accomplished in his tenure on the show through testimonies from his former co-anchor, Joan Lunden, and current co-anchor, Diane Sawyer. His alma mater, Princeton University, was there to commemorate the departure of a legacy, sending their boys acapella choir to sing Gibson's favorite songs. Family weddings and births that occurred during his stint on *GMA* were shown and his favorite pal, Kermit the Frog, even hopped onto the couch to say a final tribute to his favorite morning news anchor. Viewers had a chance to see the lives he had touched and the breaking headlines he brought us, like his coverage on the Oklahoma City Bombing and 9/11 through heartfelt stories conveyed by family members of the tragedies.

By the end of the broadcast, I was more saddened my favorite morning news show was losing such a credentialed journalist; almost forgetting I was hearing a calming and familiar voice bid everyone his final farewell. All because I realized throughout the duration of the two-hour special, Gibson was a father figure and a friend to many viewers, but he was so much more; he was, and still is, an amazingly brilliant scholar and probing reporter, formerly of the White House Press Corps. If all anchors were seen in such a light, network execs would see a ratings jump unlike any previously witnessed since television first became a common household commodity.

America is considered the shining beacon on a hill in a world filled with darkness, and we are just that: an illusion of light. We choose to showcase beauty over brilliance, loveliness over logic, exquisiteness over experience. News executives should showcase their star anchors' talents and academic accreditations. The interviews conducted and the

headlines reported throughout the duration of a reporter's career should take precedence over his or her on-camera look; ratings need to take a backseat to effectiveness in communicating the news; and star anchors will still be stars in the end because Americans will still need to hear the news of the day. Viewers will only care about the physical appearance of anchors as long as it is a requirement to get air time, and caring about pearly white teeth and perfectly gelled hair will be important only as long as entire teams of people are kept on payroll at networks' to help them achieve glamour before going live at 5 AM. These men and women interview the best and brightest of society's across the world and here we are asking questions about their physical appearance; always nice to see America's got her priorities straight.

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