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THE TV WATCH

A New Age Of News And Views

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Never again will there be an anchor like Walter Cronkite.

And thank heaven for that.

Television news hasn't changed as much as people say. But viewers have. Few have much appetite these days for the godlike anchor who boldly intervenes in the events of the day. Nobody wants to watch Brian Williams declare that the war in Iraq is not winnable. Or see Katie Couric coax the leader of Hezbollah to visit Israel in an on-air telephone interview. When shocking tragedy happens, be it an assassination or Sept. 11, there is more than one trusted face to turn to.

Some are on cable. News coverage can seem thin, but it has never been broader. Americans get their information all over the place, from Comedy Central's "Daily Show With Jon Stewart" and ESPN to the BBC and the Russian newscast "Novosti," and they can download it to cellphones and iPods. TV correspondents compete with video bloggers, those amateurs caught in hot spots across Israel and Lebanon who post their jumpy, homemade reports on the Internet.

News briefs are shorter than ever, but weightier reports are still featured on network news and on specials. ABC's "Nightline" is hanging on even without Ted Koppel. For every inane segment on "Dateline" or plodding thumb-sucker on PBS, there is a smart, innovative documentary elsewhere. Tonight it's on FX, where "30 Days" begins its new season with an unusually close-up



CBS Photo Archive/Getty Images
Walter Cronkite reporting in 1968 on the Tet offensive in Vietnam.

and engrossing look at illegal immigration.

Those who deplore the declining quality of network news may have forgotten what it used to really look like: CBS's legendary anchor — once known as the most trusted man in America — can seem like just another network blowhard.

It's not that Mr. Cronkite isn't dignified or likable in old clips. It's just that modern viewers are more discerning about an anchor's limits. However inured we have grown to anchors personalizing the news Edward R. Murrow-style — posturing on location and occasionally letting their emotions gush like Dan Rather or CNN's Anderson Cooper — viewers expect anchors at least to feign objectivity. In today's world, Mr. Cronkite's Olympian pronouncements about war and peace seem inappropriate.

"Walter Cronkite: Witness to History," an American Masters special on PBS tonight, tries to recapture that early sense of awe and skates serenely across the surface. Mr. Cronkite, 89, interviewed at the helm of his sailboat, still looks hale and disarmingly good-humored, and his many colleagues and friends make the point that he was a real newsman schooled in radio and wire-service work during World War II who became the kindly "Uncle Walter" of unconditional trust.

"He never let himself dominate the news," Bill Moyers says. "He always understood that people were more interested in the message than they were in the messenger." That, of course, is nonsense. Mr. Cronkite is a mythic figure not because he broke news but because he invested news with his personal stamp of authority, from the Vietnam War and Watergate to the Middle East peace process in 1977.

The documentary makes a lot of the role he played while covering the death of President John F. Kennedy, and that has perhaps been oversold. He informed and consoled the nation with stoic grace, but it's hard to imagine that anyone in that chair, at that moment, wouldn't have been just as memorable simply because he was there. (There are people who mist up at the name of Howard Cosell because they first heard of

John Lennon's murder during "Monday Night Football.")

The CBS commentator Andy Rooney may be right when he calls Mr. Cronkite "the best anchorman there ever was." But he is wrong to say "he typifies all the best of what television news should be and no longer is."

The program "30 Days" is television news done differently. Morgan Spurlock, the creator of "Super Size Me," introduced this documentary series last year, and started by putting himself at the center of a 30-day experiment: he and his fiancée moved to Columbus, Ohio, to live on the minimum wage. (They almost starved.)

This time, too, he also recruits others to change lives for a month. In the episode "Immigration," Frank George, an American who emigrated legally from Cuba as a boy and is a rifle-carrying member of the Minutemen, a citizen group that patrols the Mexican border, is sent to live and work with a family of illegal immigrants in East Los Angeles.

It's the kind of fish-out-of-water conceit that fuels reality shows like "Wife Swap," only this one is not done for laughs. Mr. George, passionately opposed to any legislation that would grant amnesty to illegal immigrants, has to defend his position while sharing a one-bedroom apartment with Rigoberto and Patricia and their five children. (The youngest two, born in the United States, are citizens, but the rest are not.) He grows fond of the parents but bristles at what he views as the presumption of their eldest daughter, an A student who plays golf and dreams of going to Princeton.

Mr. Spurlock approaches the touchy subject by picking a family of Mexican immigrants who are unsailably humble, hard-working and, except for the way they crossed the border, law-abiding. (Ann Coulter would have searched for a family of child pornographers from France.) But Mr. George's views are presented with respect, and he is very much the hero of the piece. Future episodes are just as enticing, and they include a look at outsourcing and incarceration; Mr. Spurlock becomes an inmate in a Virginia county jail.

Television news is not regarded the way it was in the golden days of CBS, but that doesn't mean it has gotten worse. A lot of it is better.