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The evolution of entertainment news: “Entertainment Tonight’s” legacy to news programs and media culture

This essay considers the impact the television news program Entertainment Tonight had on the news industry and popular culture’s appeal in society from its inception in 1981. ET defined a style of news coverage and helped draw in and maintain the audience for entertainment news that in turn affected how news outlets worldwide viewed entertainment and where it fit into programming, society and culture today. This is chronicled through interviews with the original creators, producers and writers of ET as well as news directors and producers who remember and reflect on the impact this entertainment news program had on the news media and entertainment culture. Sara Magee is Assistant Professor of Communications at Loyola University, Maryland.

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When producer Al Masini came up with the idea for *Entertainment Tonight* in 1980 he wasn’t sure it would work. Not only did he want to create a daily news program in the style of the traditional television newscast, he also wanted it to be completely based on the glamour and glitz of the celebrity culture that seemed to fascinate society. In addition, the program needed to be able to pull in audiences for struggling local TV affiliates and independent stations around the United States. However he was confident in the endeavour, and in the knowledge that not only were newscasts a key source of revenue for television stations but also that the mystery behind the celebrity culture was a huge draw for viewers. Magazines and tabloids touted the latest goings on of the Hollywood elite and brought their sometimes glamorous, sometimes scandalous, lifestyles to the forefront of popular culture. In the process, they also sold millions of copies in such locations as the supermarkets. Seeing that, Masini

determined he could do the same thing on TV, particularly in the light of the fact that local 6 and 11pm newscasts were attracting large numbers of viewers.

More than thirty years later, that simple entertainment-based newscast remains one of the most popular in the world. Its reach extends far and wide and its influences can be seen in nearly every element of society today, from local television newscasts, to copycat entertainment news shows such as *Access Hollywood* and *Extra*, to entirely entertainment based cable networks such as E! Entertainment Television, to the myriad celebrity culture websites and their information that now permeate the Internet. The program itself has become a touchstone for popular culture in all its forms, from television to music, movies and more, referenced in just about every form of media at one time or another. Even more importantly, but lesser known, is how *ET* changed the way broadcast news and media itself thought of entertainment stories and popular culture in general. By showing there was a market for this type of news coverage on television, not to mention that it was in high demand by younger audience of 18 to 30 year olds, *ET* became a major factor in how news organisations adapted and worked stories about popular culture icons and events into their programs. While there are differing opinions on just how much of an impact the program had on the content and style of local, cable and network news programs, the fact that it had an impact in some form is universally acknowledged.¹

This essay explores the impact this program had on television news and the entertainment genre and how, in doing so, it helped foster the integration of celebrity news and stories even more into popular culture and society. That story is told in part through narrative history from the memories and thoughts of those who were there at the program's inception as well as those in the news business at the time. Analysis of several early *ET* episodes also plays a part in illustrating the important role that *ET* had on society and in how entertainment news is viewed today.

Television News Before ET

Before 1981 entertainment news on television and in media had a limited range. Newspaper columnist and broadcaster Walter Winchell had made a career of reporting news about celebrities and their lives in his printed and radio work. Though wildly popular with readers and listeners, if not with the celebrities themselves, Winchell never quite made the transition from radio to television.² Gossip magazines and tabloids such as *Confidential* and the *National Enquirer* also helped spread the entertainment message through glossy photographs and gossipy articles. On the television front, programs such as Edward R. Murrow's celebrity interview program *Person to Person* and the celebrity biography series *This is Your Life* had proved that people were interested in going behind the scenes of celebrity lives.³ Network television morning news programs such as *The Today Show* and *Good Morning America* featured more celebrity interviews and segments by the mid to late 1970s including reports from television gossip columnist Rona Barrett. Barrett helped pioneer the 'one-on-one' celebrity interview through her work with the ABC network and helped pave the way for future entertainment journalists.⁴ By the late 1970s programs such as *PM*

Magazine were providing local and national feature and entertainment news segments that could be inserted into local programs in markets across America.⁵ On the cable front in 1980, Ted Turner and CNN had just emerged to begin the first cable news network and as part of the twenty-four-hour news coverage had started an evening program called *People Tonight*. The program focused on entertainment events and happenings in New York and Los Angeles. It was unique because, at the time, many local evening newscasts contained feature stories or film and theatre reviews by critics but no heavily-focused entertainment news stories appeared unless a celebrity died or some important news-making event had occurred.⁶ On the overall cable front in 1980, entertainment news was covered only on an occasional basis, and no one had found a way to bring it to the forefront of television, much less knew it had the potential to attract an audience or that it would be enormously popular.

CNN

“Well, if you regard ‘ET’ as the grandfather of television entertainment news programming, then CNN is really the great-grandfather in some ways,” said CNN’s first president Reese Schonfeld in 2008.⁷ When CNN went on air in 1980, the network was a new venture, a twenty-four-hour cable news operation, and during its first year, like any new network, it struggled to define the type of news coverage it could and would provide. Part of that coverage included taking a look at the country’s arts, entertainment, and cultural world through a 10 p.m. hour-long program called *People Tonight*. The program aired live each night and featured interviews and stories covering the latest entertainment news such as plays and musicals opening on Broadway, and stories on political party news and social events in Washington, DC. One of the program’s first reporters was Robin Leach, a former newspaper man from Britain. Leach recalled the excitement of being able to bring entertainment news and interviews to television, despite the problems that came from working with a format that had not quite been developed yet. “It was radical television,” he recalled. “Until CNN, everything was pre-packaged television. Now television became real, with blemishes and warts, because it was now live.”⁸

CNN knew from the start that with so little cable penetration across the United States it would not attract as large an audience as broadcast networks and stations although Schonfeld asserts they were not really concerned, because they had been aware of those numbers from the start. However once CNN demonstrated the effectiveness of satellite delivery to cable systems and/or to broadcast stations, it was inevitable that competitors like *ET* could begin to deliver their news programs, entertainment and sports very effectively to very large audiences. Schonfeld remembered Robert Wold, the owner of The Wold Company, which distributed CNN from Los Angeles, telling him about the proposed idea for *ET* and explaining that the syndicated entertainment program was intended to be delivered by satellite. Wold asked Schonfeld if it was something their show should consider and he told him no because he thought *People Tonight* could stand up to that type of competition. He soon admitted he was wrong as *ET* surpassed his program rather quickly. However, he added that some of that was *People Tonight*’s fault for bringing in a new anchor person and a

new format just as *ET* was going on the air and letting some of his biggest assets go to the competition. “They took some of our producers, guys from our Hollywood office, and Robin Leach,” he recalled. “One of the greatest mistakes I made was releasing Robin Leach from his contract because *ET* had offered Robin a much more lucrative deal, and I did not want to stand in Robin’s way.”⁹

Schonfeld firmly believed, however, that *ET* and *People Tonight* had different agendas and did things in different ways. He likened *People Tonight* to the arts section of the *New York Times* while he compared *ET* to a fan magazine. And while he thought there was a place for entertainment news on television, he hoped that CNN would develop a more cultured way of covering entertainment stories so that they would appeal to a news audience. He likened it to being more about the entertainment business and those involved in the cultural scenes in Washington and New York City. However, when popular syndicated talk show host Mike Douglas was hired to anchor the program in early 1982 it became much more of an interview-type program with longer segments that could not compete with the *ET* style of covering different events and happenings in the entertainment world in short segments mixed with features and celebrity interviews. The programs never competed head-to-head for audiences, but *People Tonight* lost viewers and the show was cancelled in 1983.

People Tonight may have received lukewarm reaction from viewers during its early years but if nothing else, it proved that entertainment news had the potential to interest viewers and helped CNN begin to establish a presence as the dominant news force it would become. With *People Tonight* floundering but interest in entertainment news growing, the question for CNN became how to incorporate more entertainment news into the overall CNN format to help garner an audience. “It would never be wall-to-wall coverage of something in the entertainment world,” Schonfeld said, “but entertainment news began to work its way into the daily news coverage that we provided 24/7. It got an audience; that was the bottom line.”¹⁰

A Typical ET Program in the 1980s

Before continuing, it might be helpful to contextualise what a typical *ET* broadcast looked like during its foundational years in the 1980s. For example, the July 22, 1985 episode opened with video of singer Bruce Springsteen performing a concert and followed it with a two-and-a-half minute story on his fans that had lined up for days to get tickets. The story focused on how devoted his fans were and how much money and time they would spend on a celebrity or musician they enjoyed. Next was a story about the re-issue of the movie *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial* in theatres which drew together old and new fans alike. The fans had the chance to talk about why they would see the film again—three years after its original release. The next few stories focused on celebrities raising money for charity. A two-and-a-half minute story looked at actress Brooke Shields’ fundraising efforts for African relief, followed by a forty-second piece about singer Wayne Newton selling his horses to raise money for charity.

The show then did a series of stories about the business side of entertainment, including a detailed look into two smaller entertainment companies that merged and the Federal Communications Commission rejection of the “Must Carry” television regulations.¹¹ The focus then shifted back to feature stories with a piece on celebrities attending an event at Vassar College, where they talked to film students about their craft. It was followed by a preview of the upcoming movie *PeeWee’s Big Adventure* and viewers were then alerted to which movies would be in video stores the next week. The segment ended with paparazzi pictures of celebrities celebrating a birthday.

The final segment of the show featured a story on singer David Lee Roth promoting his band’s (Van Halen) newest release. Next was an interview with actress Victoria Principal, focusing on her recent marriage and her attempt to balance a movie career and a home life. Actor Vincent Price took a look at seminal Hollywood horror films and the show finished with the newest video from singer Don Henley.¹²

From examining the content it is clear that stories were geared more towards informing people about celebrities, their works and their lives, often in two minute or longer stories. A wide mix of interview styles was used from sitting down with celebrities inside their homes, to interviews on the set of their latest projects. Graphics were simple and uncomplicated but featured clean lines and simple type while video consisted mainly of stars on movie sets, in their homes, in the community or at fundraising events. There were no scandalous photos of celebrities, no garish music and no real discussion of anything that might show the celebrities in an unfavourable light. While *ET* would cover celebrity scandals when they happened, it was a different style of coverage to that which is usually seen today. The focus then was more on getting the facts out, a traditional hard news philosophy, than reporting on gossip and rumour surrounding an event. But it was formats, stories and broadcasts like this that had many other local and network newsmagazines and newscasts taking note.

Network Newsmagazines, & Local News

ET had now begun to draw attention to the fact that audiences were interested in entertainment news, something that CNN had jumped on, and eventually other cable networks would follow. But the broadcast networks also were trying to grab a piece of the entertainment pie, and according to some this occurred long before *ET* established a formula for what worked and what did not. Throughout the 1970s and into the early-1980s, morning news programs had been making efforts to focus on not only news but feature and entertainment pieces. Entertainment news had also become part of ABC’s primetime programming through *20/20* which, when it premiered in 1978, not only took on a magazine style of reporting news events but also included stories and features on some of the big names in the entertainment business as well. This was in part because of the emergence of journalist Barbara Walters who blurred even more the lines between news anchor and entertainment reporter in her in-depth profiles of celebrities.¹³ *20/20* co-creator and producer Dan Cooper recalled making this happen by focusing the final segment of each show on a profile of a

rock star, celebrity or popular musician. He built anticipation for these stories by promoting them throughout the program, hoping to get people to persist with viewing the program to see the celebrity profile at the end of the show. The final entertainment segment was so popular with viewers, that Cooper remembered often being in the control room during the taping of the show and getting a telephone call from ABC news president Rooney Arledge, who told him to extend the promotional video that led into the final segment to give people more time to listen to the interviewee's music.¹⁴ This blend of news and entertainment stories proved to do well for *20/20*, so when *ET* began three years later, Cooper said he was not surprised the program worked, especially because he believed it had been conceived more as a promotional vehicle for celebrities and Hollywood than anything else, as a televisual version of *Variety* or the *Hollywood Reporter*.

As *ET*'s first season got underway, Cooper also noticed that news about the business side of Hollywood, such as box office reports and weekly TV ratings seemed to hold an interest for viewers. Magazines such as *Billboard* and *Variety* would print the box office and ratings lists, but those numbers were not seen on a television newscast. However, Cooper saw how popular the daily and weekly *ET* box office and ratings reports were and noted that many local and cable newscasts soon began to emulate them to some extent. *ET* movie critic Leonard Maltin agreed, saying the program pioneered television coverage of box office numbers and ratings reports. "No one had done it before and suddenly, because *ET* reported it, people were interested" he said.¹⁵

As for the overall impact of *ET* on network programs such as *20/20* or the morning news programs, Cooper believed it did not have a major impact on how entertainment news was covered by more traditional news outlets. "Entertainment news had always been out there, it was always of interest, especially when you look back to the fan magazines and movie and television mania of the 1940s and 1950s," he said. "The new thing was bringing it to television." However, he admitted *ET* set the model for the content and reporting style of future syndicated entertainment programs such as *Access Hollywood* and *Extra* and the more tabloid style news magazines that would emerge throughout the late-1980s and early-1990s.¹⁶

In the case of nightly network newscasts, it was extremely rare to see any type of entertainment story on any one of them during the early-1980s. If a famous person died, the event might receive a photo and a quick twenty-second on-camera reader or a short piece of video to mark the passing. But in general the nightly newscasts had established audiences, reputations and clear missions about what they intended to do. "For almost a half century, covering the important news of the world was what ABC News, NBC News, and CBS News did for a living," wrote Lawrence Grossman in *Columbia Journalism Review* in 1999. "They reigned as the kings of serious and responsible broadcast journalism, the pride of their networks."¹⁷ While none of the network nightly news anchors were willing to be interviewed for this research, others who worked in the business at the time said it was pretty clear that network news was not going to go the route of entertainment news in the near future. ABC News anchor Harry Reasoner at the time is known for being very vocal about this issue, refusing to share a news

desk with Barbara Walters, a woman he did not consider a journalist because she did celebrity interviews that he did not consider true news.¹⁸ “There was always more of a line between news and entertainment in network newscasts,” said *ET* director Steve Hirszen, who spent several years directing the national 6:30pm CBS Nightly Newscast during the late 1970s. “It was rare you would see any entertainment news other than perhaps a short, on-camera obituary now and then, although most times I would fight to get a minute and a half on.” He said that most likely, there would be less of a problem today covering a celebrity death or major arrest on the nightly news, simply because entertainment news now is omnipresent and it attracts viewers. But he added that it would still be a relatively rare occurrence.¹⁹

Network newscasts adhered to the hard news stories, in large part because they prided themselves in being the newscasts of national record. Cooper believed this was because they felt no need to report on the softer entertainment news stories because they would usually appear on the newsmagazines or the syndicated programs such as *ET* that aired after their broadcasts. Cooper admitted, however, that entertainment news is something that probably appears more frequently today, although to a lesser extent in national newscasts, because of the need to keep up with the cable and Internet news venues that attract a good deal of the television audience that they are hoping to retain. In general, Cooper believes the impact of *ET* on national news programs has been not so much in the content area as in the need to consider more carefully what types of things can be done to attract an audience. In many cases, this includes dealing with how syndicated programs such as *ET*, cable news networks and technology, especially the Internet, are drawing away television news audiences and determining what can be done to get them back.²⁰

Local Newscasts

While cable news networks, network newsmagazines and morning shows were finding more room for entertainment news in their programming, local news providers, too, were beginning to see the benefits of having something entertainment-related in their news coverage. Ohio University Associate Professor and former television news producer Mary Rogus remembered her first impressions of the program when it premiered. She had been working as a producer and a reporter at a television station in Roanoke, Virginia, and recalled being extremely surprised at *ET* on her first viewing. She and her colleagues were unsure of why the program, based on entertainment and what they considered more feature-type stories, was being produced in what looked like a local hard newscast format. “The first surprise was, wait a minute, this is like the format of our newscasts,” she said. “The second thing that became really clear was that it was not only like a local news format but it was a really well produced local newscast.” As she moved into executive news producing in the early 1980s, she told her producers to watch *ET* to see how it put stories together with audio and video, as well as wrote and produced what she considered to be excellent promotional copy.²¹ It is interesting to note that Masini, when creating the program, said he did not consciously fashion it after a hard newscast format. However, most of the principles that he used, such as shorter stories that flowed

from one topic to another and the fast-pace he wanted for the show, were staples in local television newscasts everywhere.²² This was not surprising since *ET* directors and producers in many cases came from network and hard news backgrounds.

Vice President of Operations and former KLAS-TV News Director Robert Stodal had a slightly different view of *ET* when it premiered. He was working in Las Vegas when the program debuted. "Initially, it didn't bother me," he said. "In the early days, they were doing a mix of successful movies, a little behind the scenes, and other news, things that people were interested in but weren't really competition for local newscasts." He said that KLAS newscasts had always prided themselves on covering the community, of reporting the stories and events of significance to local residents. Most of the time this did not include entertainment stories unless they were related to something involving one of the casinos or the entertainment industry in Las Vegas more generally. He was not against reporting entertainment news, especially being located in "Sin City," but he believed local newscasts should focus on the local communities and issues important to them and become the place of record. However, by 1981, KLAS was expanding its news operation to provide newscasts at 5, 5:30 and 6 p.m. and develop a niche as the community source for news and information. With the advent of *ET*, therefore, it was a natural choice to put into the station's news niche, just after the nightly news broadcast at 6:30. "It took off like a rocket," recalled Stodal. "It wasn't because it was Las Vegas; it was because it was on a station where it fit the all encompassing news and entertainment niche. It fit really well with our image."²³

KLAS' current General Manager Emily Neilson, who was working in management at the station in 1981, recalled the general manager at the time being excited about the program because it would be able to deliver fresh, relatable information that would fit with that news niche that the station wanted to portray. "We wanted something that would complement the news, and a daily entertainment report was something new and exciting that did that," she said. "*ET* skewed younger in the ratings," she recalled. "Its competition during that time slot skewed older, so that was a benefit for us to get a younger audience."²⁴ The program did so well that the station still airs it nightly at 7 p.m.

WBAY's current News Director Tom McCarey agreed with Stodal on the impact that *ET* had on news coverage in the Green Bay, Wisconsin market when it premiered. He was working at the station at the time, although not as news director, and recalled the program having little impact on the station's local news coverage, which he thought was more local event-and-community oriented. Like Stodal, he believed in keeping the local news local and allowing programs such as *ET* to air in conjunction or after newscasts. However, he said that if a celebrity died or a major event happened in Hollywood, it would probably be put into a newscast but would not receive a heavy focus. In his view, the most important impact *ET* had on local news was on feature reporting and the incorporation of lighter news stories into local news broadcasts. "I think you were much more likely to see more feature material in local newscasts after the advent of *ET* and *PM Magazine*," he remarked. "People were interested."²⁵

For Rogus, it was the realisation that entertainment could be news and was being accepted as news by the audience demographic that was watching *ET* that particularly caught the attention of local stations. She noted that television ratings showed that *ET* was getting the coveted female and younger audience (18-30 year olds) that local news was desperately trying to attract. As more stations, such as KLAS attempted to start 5 o'clock newscasts, which were aimed at women, material was much more geared towards lighter, human interest and consumer stories. The harder news would come with the traditional 6 o'clock newscasts and then the national nightly news at 6:30pm. As *ET* began to draw the female audience, entertainment news also began to show up in television research. "In our research, we'd say rank these topics from most important to least important in a local newscast," Rogus said, "and prior to *ET* entertainment news never even showed up in that research picture. However, after *ET* we found that entertainment news really popped with women."²⁶ With a way to attract the coveted audience, local 5 o'clock newscasts throughout the 1980s began to incorporate entertainment segments into their shows. Stodal said KLAS only put entertainment stories into local newscasts if they had some effect on the Las Vegas community. The ratings the station was getting were fine and what it wished from its audience.²⁷

While the extent to which *ET* had an impact on local, network, and cable news is something that can be debated among news personnel in every market, the fact remains it brought about new ways of thinking about entertainment news and where it fit into the news business. Local newscasts during the early 1980s were beginning to put slightly more entertainment into their 5 and 6pm shows. And if local news did not want to put those types of stories in newscasts, *ET* was a separate draw that complemented the news and information blocks that stations ran between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. While time and technology have no doubt added new aspects to be considered about the impact of entertainment news on broadcast television, it was *ET* that really helped start the broadcast news business thinking about where and when entertainment news could be used to their advantage. By creating this program that gave people 'behind the scenes' and 'in-depth' looks at the glory and shame of celebrities and their lives, it helped entrench the desire for celebrity news and gossip that is now prevalent in every media and news organization today. In addition, the idea that entertainment news is and some would argue has always been, a part of popular culture owes a debt to *ET*.

Legacy

Entertainment Tonight played a large part in the development of television newscasts over the past thirty years but it also helped change the way entertainment stories were and are considered in the news business today. In today's news world, you are likely to see the latest scandal a celebrity is involved in splashed over tabloid magazines and newspapers as well as cable news channels, evening news magazines, local newscasts, Internet sites and even the network nightly newscasts. Entertainment stories are everywhere, and to many they have become news. With younger audience demographics still highly in

demand, television news audiences on the decline, and the growing aspects of technology that make news of all kinds accessible at a moment's notice striking fear in news departments on every level, entertainment news seems to be slipping into the broadcast news mix more often. That line between traditional hard news and soft news is being blurred by the increasing inclusion of entertainment stories and news programs and magazines devoted to the latest Hollywood gossip, Britney Spears' or Lindsay Lohan's latest drinking binge, or the latest *Twilight* film craze sweeping the nation.

This blurring line between news and entertainment is something those behind *ET* have mixed feelings about, especially when considering the role that television's grandfather of syndicated entertainment newsmagazines played. "The line between news and entertainment doesn't exist anymore," said Paramount executive John Goldhammer. "I'm very torn because I was one who helped create this monster."²⁸ Along with Winchell, Barrett and other print and television personalities that helped create entertainment news, *ET* writer Bill Olsen admitted to having conversations with friends in which they would debate if programs such as *ET* were responsible for the blurred lines. "On one hand, it was kind of fun to do this, to create a program like *ET*," he noted, "but on the other hand, when I see how frivolous some of the stuff has become, I feel a little ashamed or weird because we're pretty much responsible for inventing that."²⁹ Most of those who spent their early years bringing *ET* to life said they had no doubt that the program helped create a market for entertainment news on television and, by creating such a demand, inevitably had an major influence on how cable, local, and even network newscasts viewed entertainment.

"I think what everyone would tell you is that the regular news business sort of parodies the entertainment news business," said segment producer Ken Furman. "There's so much scandal and tabloid on local, cable and national new programs and magazines, its kind of reached epidemic proportions."³⁰ That's not true for CBS's *60 Minutes*, said its current executive editor and former *ET* segment producer Vicky Gordon. "The rule here is what's the story and how do we tell it. That's what this show is about. There's no entertainment crossover."³¹ Still, segment producer Jackie Burke said that *ET* would always be known for contributing the idea to news that celebrities and stars brought in ratings and partly made local, cable, and network news take a long, hard look at how entertainment news could help them win the ratings wars.³²

Former *ET* executive producer George Merlis shared his worries that there is simply too much entertainment and not enough news in the news world today, blaming *ET* for shortening people's attention spans with briefer, faster-paced stories with little substance, thus reducing the substance of news stories in general.³³ Coordinating Producer Bruce Cook said the impact of *ET* on the news media might not have been a good thing because news has become nothing but a profitable and promotional product while reporter Scott Osborne, a graduate of the Columbia School of Journalism, said he should probably feel outraged at what passes for news these days, but he admits that if it gets people to watch, its not necessarily a bad thing.³⁴ Weekend co-host Leeza Gibbons agreed, saying that there is no arguing the fact that entertainment news sells.

“ET’ definitely had local news and cable and the networks looking at how we do this type of coverage and not get tarnished,” she said. “The whole notion of celebrities making news and becoming news has to be considered and taken into account when looking at society today.”³⁵ And former Paramount executive Rich Frank said he believes there is no journalistic integrity in entertainment or news media today, in part because of TV networks and stations operating with smaller budgets and more news hours to fill.³⁶

The debate over the diminishing news and entertainment line notwithstanding, one thing that everyone who worked on *ET* agreed about was that the program left a legacy. Whether it was a good or bad legacy remains a topic for debate. Writer Bob Flick said *ET* totally changed how news, especially local news, looked at entertainment. “These local newscasts wouldn’t have had a prayer’s chance at having some of the stories that are on today ad nauseam, like the paparazzi chasing young people and all that kind of junk,” he remarked.³⁷ Co-host Dixie Whatley said one thing *ET* did well was use a news format to cover things that traditionally were not considered news. “In some ways, I think you could look at it as the first step in really changing what the concept of news is,” she said, “and at some point, I think that’s to the detriment of the news itself.”³⁸ Segment producer Ed Meyer said the program completely “screwed up the news” by making it necessary that newscasts today have to have a hook to draw in a viewer, and the easiest hook, thanks to *ET*, has been a celebrity.³⁹ Merlis said *ET* had created a successful way to provide consumerist entertainment news but, in doing so, had helped create a cult of celebrity into which most television news programs, entertainment or otherwise, have fallen.⁴⁰

As for local news’ producers, *ET*’s legacy is a bit less legendary. “I wouldn’t call *ET* groundbreaking, certainly not in the sense of Edward R. Murrow,” said Stodal. “It will probably fit into the category of being the real beginning of the ‘reality show’ and simply being on air so long, that will be a legacy in and of itself.”⁴¹ Rogus believes *ET*’s legacy was that it was first, the pioneer program that everyone copied and the program that proved celebrity culture was a viable business. “It’s also still drawing a young audience and hasn’t gotten stale,” she said. “I mean who thought of entertainment news as breaking news. I mean, you didn’t run out and get the entertainment story but now everything is breaking news.”⁴²

“In the end, we’re going to be considered a tabloid and that’s too bad,” said original producer Andy Friendly. “It’s a tremendous business success and will be on the air forever just as a celebrity tabloid magazine instead of what it hoped to be, which was a more journalistic exercise about the entertainment business.”⁴³ Tabloid or not, *ET* succeeded in creating the genre of entertainment news on television and, according to segment producer Helaine Swerdloff-Ross, made entertainment news viable and legitimate for television for the first time in history.⁴⁴ “It changed the way we consume entertainment news,” added Gibbons. “Whether that was a blessing or a curse, I think we don’t know that yet, but the show did set an expectation for a relationship between news and entertainment that is still evolving. *ET* is the first bite of the entertainment apple to which we have all become addicted.”⁴⁵

With all the groundbreaking initiatives that *ET* managed to create in television entertainment news, the program tends to be seen by critics and fans as simply a well established tabloid newsmagazine that delights in bringing scandal, gossip, and fashion news about the entertainment world into millions of homes nightly. While that is true, no one can argue that in doing this, *ET* has created a genre of news that does what everyone in the news business hopes and prays for: it attracts audiences. By looking at how the program established itself and what it did for the television news industry, it becomes clear that while entertainment news was always around, establishing it on television had wide-ranging implications and effects that can still be seen today. Countless other gossip and entertainment websites and blogs would not exist today if *ET* had not helped popularise the market for celebrity news and create a desire for information about celebrity culture the world over. What remains to be seen is just how much of an impact this program has and will continue to have on the media, news business and society in general in the years to come. Times and technology may change but entertainment, and entertainment news are here to stay. And as for *Entertainment Tonight*, perhaps original creator Al Masini said it best. "The truth is that *ET* can stay on just as long as CBS, NBC, and ABC news can be on," he remarked. "It's forever, it's entertainment news."

¹ Robert Edelstein & Jim Benson, "A Bona Fide Original, A Billion Dollar Success Story, and One of Today's Most Influential TV Franchises," *Broadcasting & Cable*, October 23, 2006, Supplement, 30; and Kevin Downey, "ET: It Changed Showbiz and the Syndie Biz as Well," *Broadcasting & Cable*, November 11, 2003, 22.

² Neal Gabler, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity* (New York: First Vintage Books, 1995), 552.

³ "Person to Person," *The Museum of Broadcast Communications*, <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/P/htmlP/personoper/personoper.htm> (accessed on September 3, 2012); and Mary Desjardins, "Maureen O'Hara's Confidential Life: Recycling Stars Through Gossip and Moral Biography," in Janet Thumm, Ed., *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s* (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 119-120.

⁴ Greg Braxton, "Rona Barrett Returns to the Spotlight," *Los Angeles Times* (June 17, 2010). <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jun/17/entertainment/la-et-rona-20100617> (accessed on February 25, 2013).

⁵ Telephone interview, George Merlis, April 11, 2008; and Steve Barkin, *American Television News: The Media Marketplace and the Public Interest* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 122.

⁶ Interview, Mary Rogus, May 29, 2008.

⁷ Telephone interview, Reese Schonfeld, April 9, 2008.

⁸ Telephone interview, Robin Leach, December 27, 2007.

⁹ Telephone interview, Schonfeld.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 'Must-carry' rules were established in the 1970s and mandated that cable companies carry various local and public television stations within a cable provider's service area on their systems. The goal was to make sure local broadcast stations did not lose viewers to growing cable networks. The US Supreme Court in the mid-1980s decided 'must carry' rules violated the First Amendment after cable companies claimed they were unconstitutional. Since then they've been debated, changed and reformed in numerous ways.

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- ¹² This information comes from an analysis of the July 22, 1985 edition of *ET*. The analysis was conducted February 21-22, 2008, at the UCLA Film and Television Archives in Los Angeles. A Beta tape of the episode was watched and analyzed for descriptive information.
- ¹³ Barkin, *American Television News*, 89.
- ¹⁴ Telephone interview, Dan Cooper, April 25, 2008.
- ¹⁵ Telephone interview, Leonard Maltin, May 1, 2008.
- ¹⁶ Telephone interview, Cooper.
- ¹⁷ Lawrence Grossman, "Will Success Spoil Network News?" *Columbia Journalism Review*, 38:1 (May/June 1999); 58.
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA54699544&v=2.1&u=loyoland_main&it=r&p=ONE&sw=w (accessed on September 3, 2012)
- ¹⁸ Douglass Daniel, *Harry Reasoner: A Life in the News* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), 158.
- ¹⁹ Telephone interview, Steve Hirszen, April 9, 2008.
- ²⁰ Interview, Cooper; and Jonathan Morris, "The Fox News Factor," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 10:3 (Summer 2005); 56-79.
- ²¹ Interview, Rogus.
- ²² Interview, Masini.
- ²³ Interview, Robert Stodal, April 15, 2008.
- ²⁴ Interview, Emily Neilson, April 15, 2008.
- ²⁵ Telephone interview, Tom McCarey, April 2, 2008.
- ²⁶ Interview, Rogus.
- ²⁷ Interview, Stodal.
- ²⁸ Telephone interview, John Goldhammer, January 9, 2008.
- ²⁹ Telephone interview, Bill Olsen, April 26, 2008.
- ³⁰ Telephone interview, Ken Furman, April 2, 2008.
- ³¹ Telephone interview, Vicky Gordon, April 23, 2008.
- ³² Telephone interview, Jackie Burke, May 6, 2008.
- ³³ Telephone interview, George Merlis, April 11, 2008.
- ³⁴ Telephone interview, Bruce Cook, April 3, 2008; and Telephone interview, Scott Osborne, May 12, 2008.
- ³⁵ Telephone interview, Leeza Gibbons, January 28, 2008.
- ³⁶ Telephone interview, Rich Frank, January 28, 2008.
- ³⁷ Telephone interview, Bob Flick, April 10, 2008.
- ³⁸ Telephone interview, Dixie Whatley, May 5, 2008.
- ³⁹ Telephone interview, Ed Meyer, March 19, 2008.
- ⁴⁰ Telephone interview, Merlis.
- ⁴¹ Telephone Interview, Stodal.
- ⁴² Interview, Rogus.
- ⁴³ Telephone interview, Andy Friendly, April 1, 2008.
- ⁴⁴ Telephone interview, Helaine Swerdloff-Ross, April 2, 2008.
- ⁴⁵ Telephone interview, Gibbons.