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Don Hewitt, Creator of '60 Minutes,' Dies at 86

By [JACQUES STEINBERG](#)

[Don Hewitt](#), who changed the course of broadcast news by creating the television magazine “60 Minutes,” fusing journalism and show business as never before, and who then presided over that much-copied program for nearly four decades, died Wednesday at his home in Bridgehampton, N.Y. He was 86 and also had a home on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The cause was cancer, his wife, Marilyn Berger, said. In an interview in March, Mr. Hewitt said that doctors had found a cancerous tumor on his pancreas and that he was being admitted to [Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center](#) in Manhattan for treatment.

In a career of more than half a century at CBS News, Mr. Hewitt bridged the history of television journalism, from its birth in the long shadow of radio, through its golden age as an unrivaled fixture in dens and living rooms, to its middle-age present, under siege by the Internet. As a director and producer, Mr. Hewitt helped shape the early broadcasts of pioneers like Edward R. Murrow, Douglas Edwards and [Walter Cronkite](#) and oversaw CBS’s coverage of watershed moments like the first [presidential debate](#), between [Richard M. Nixon](#) and [John F. Kennedy](#), in 1960; the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963; and the [NASA](#) space missions of the late 1960s.

But it was as creator and executive producer of “[60 Minutes](#)” that he had his biggest impact — imagining, in effect, what an electronic version of Life magazine would be like, and then bringing it to the screen with a mix of hard-hitting investigative pieces and celebrity profiles. It was a formula that the other networks soon imitated.

Mr. Hewitt was also instrumental in the emergence of the television reporter as a celebrity. The reporters he recruited for “60 Minutes” — including [Mike](#)

[Wallace](#), Harry Reasoner, [Dan Rather](#) and later Lesley Stahl and [Ed Bradley](#) — became as recognizable as the politicians they confronted and the entertainers they interviewed. Whatever lineup of reporters was featured in a particular television season, they were presented to their Sunday night audience as equals.

Within a few years, the program had become a ratings juggernaut, a status that until then had been the province of comedies like those featuring [Jackie Gleason](#) and [Lucille Ball](#). It took up residence among the top 10 shows on prime-time television for more than two decades, earning the network “maybe \$2 billion,” Mr. Hewitt once estimated. At its peak, in the 1979-80 television season, “60 Minutes,” opening with the trademark ticking stopwatch, was seen in an estimated 28 million homes each Sunday, according to Nielsen Media Research.

Separately, Mr. Hewitt was given credit for creating, or helping to create, a number of television news innovations, like putting headsets on newsmakers at political conventions and other events so they might be interviewed remotely, and displaying type on screen — a subject’s name, for example. He said he got that idea from the sliding letters on the wall-mounted menu of a diner in Chicago in 1952.

He also gave new meaning to the word anchorman, which referred, he said, not to the anchor of a ship but to the final runner on a four-person relay team, the one who in effect would carry the news home and receive the most attention in the process.

A New Model for TV

In more than 35 years at the helm of “60 Minutes,” which he led from its founding in 1968 to his departure, under pressure, at age 82 in 2004, Mr. Hewitt made stars (and millionaires) not only of Mr. Rather, Mr. Wallace, Mr. Bradley and Ms. Stahl, but also of Morley Safer, Steve Kroft and Andy Rooney. While theirs were the faces that, collectively, opened the program for decades each Sunday night at 7 (or a bit later in football season), the program that viewers ultimately saw was largely forged off-camera by Mr. Hewitt.

Having been fired in the mid-1960s as executive producer of Mr. Cronkite's "CBS Evening News" — Fred Friendly, who was president of CBS News at the time, faulted Mr. Hewitt for his emphasis on "lots of dazzle, lots of pace" — Mr. Hewitt used his brief time in exile within the news division headquarters in Manhattan to conceive a program that he likened to a broadcast version of a general-interest magazine like Life.

Mr. Hewitt reasoned that "60 Minutes" — named for the hour of prime time the network would give him each week — would toggle between hard news and soft.

"We could look into [Marilyn Monroe's](#) closet, so long as we looked into Robert Oppenheimer's laboratory, too," he wrote in his 2001 memoir "Tell Me a Story." "We could make the news entertaining, without compromising our integrity."

A Force Behind the News

Behind the scenes, he could be a stern, hyperkinetic taskmaster. Tom Goodman, a former public relations executive at CBS, recalled Wednesday that Mr. Hewitt was known for the occasional screaming match with Mr. Wallace and would sometimes threaten to quit over minor matters, behavior that the management knew it had to put up with.

A story often told at CBS, and by Mr. Hewitt himself, involved an incident in which he and Mr. Wallace were on a plane together when Mr. Wallace collapsed. Mr. Hewitt recalled looking down and saying, using an expletive: "Oh, he's dead. Now we're never going to catch 'Cheers.'" "

Mr. Hewitt established and enforced a set of fundamental elements for the program: an emphasis on narrative; interviews in which the questions (and questioners) were often more interesting than the subjects themselves; occasional gotcha moments that snared wrongdoers like Watergate co-conspirators or cigarette manufacturers; and, as respites from the more sober reports, candid conversations with personalities like [Barbra Streisand](#), [Lena Horne](#), [Robin Williams](#) and [Bruce Springsteen](#).

The format spawned a host of newsmagazine competitors, among them “20/20,” “Prime Time Live” and, to some extent, “Nightline,” all on ABC, as well as “Dateline” on [NBC](#). For several years it also had a sister broadcast on CBS, known as “60 Minutes II” and “60 Minutes Wednesday.”

“ ‘60 Minutes’ was the model and the framework of everything that followed,” said Victor Neufeld, who was a senior producer of “20/20” at its inception in the late 1970s and was the program’s executive producer for 16 years, ending in 2002. “ ‘20/20’ was a different version of ‘60 Minutes.’ It was the same concept of taking information and telling compelling stories, nonfiction stories with strong characters, in a prime-time environment.”

But by demonstrating that news could deliver big audiences at a fraction of the cost of a scripted comedy or drama, Mr. Hewitt and “60 Minutes” also helped usher in an era in television in which reality would become routinely wrapped in the gilt of excess and sensationalism.

In more recent years, an offshoot of “Dateline” called “To Catch a Predator” would seek to entrap pedophiles on camera in ways reminiscent of one of Mr. Wallace’s early pieces. In that report, a “60 Minutes” producer working with the Better Government Association of Chicago had turned a Chicago storefront into a dummy health clinic, with the intent of catching a representative for a blood lab in the act of seeking a kickback. At the climactic moment, Mr. Wallace appeared from behind a one-way mirror.

With a mix of stories in both content and tone, Mr. Hewitt strove for balance on “60 Minutes.” But that studied approach was thrown to the wayside by some early-evening entertainment news shows, which focused on gossip and stories that were often spoon-fed to them by movie and television publicists.

As his “60 Minutes” career was drawing to a close, Mr. Hewitt appeared to acknowledge what he had wrought.

“We started a trend, and we ruined television,” he said in 2002, on an episode of the [PBS](#) program “American Masters” that focused on “60 Minutes,” “because we made it profitable to do this kind of thing.”

Mr. Hewitt was also present at what is now regarded as the inception of the modern presidential campaign: the first 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debate, which established television as the pre-eminent medium in American electoral politics. Mr. Hewitt produced and directed the face-off, in Chicago, for the three major networks.

His involvement in the event extended even to the makeup. Mr. Hewitt said he offered makeup to Kennedy, who refused. Nixon, following suit, also refused. But Kennedy was suntanned and Nixon was not, and without makeup Nixon's complexion came across as pasty, setting off his five o'clock shadow. Many critics have said that Kennedy was perceived to have won the debate, and eventually won the election, because he looked better on camera that day.

Strife at CBS

With Mr. Cronkite's death in July at age 92, CBS News has now lost two of its biggest pillars in a little over a month. There was a time when the two men were on opposite sides of a story that roiled CBS. In 1974, "60 Minutes" presented a muckraking Mike Wallace report about press junkets that named CBS as having organized free trips paid for by corporations to working journalists and identified Mr. Cronkite, the network's leading anchorman, as one who had accepted junkets in the past.

In what he later regarded as one of the darkest periods of his career, Mr. Hewitt capitulated in 1995 to CBS's demand that he kill a "60 Minutes" piece based on interviews with an "insider" from the Brown & Williamson tobacco company. The insider, a former Brown & Williamson scientist named [Jeffrey Wigand](#), had provided "60 Minutes" with evidence that the company had systematically disregarded evidence on the dangers of smoking.

The network, which was in the process of being sold to Westinghouse, worried that the broadcast could expose CBS to billions of dollars in potential liability, because it could be perceived as abetting Mr. Wigand in breaking a confidentiality agreement he had signed. Among those sharply and publicly critical of Mr. Hewitt's acquiescence were Mr. Wallace, the correspondent on the segment, and Lowell Bergman, the segment producer. Mr. Bergman's

defiance was memorialized by [Al Pacino](#), who played him in the 1999 film “The Insider,” based on a Vanity Fair article about the episode.

In his 2001 memoir, Mr. Hewitt said his hands had been tied by the network’s lawyers. He recalled telling Mr. Wallace, “Look, the only way to get this story on the air is to go out and hire a bunch of guerrillas and take the transmitter at gunpoint.”

“Failing that,” he wrote, “what could we do about it? We could quit, of course. But I had spent too much of my life making ‘60 Minutes’ what it was.”

Eventually, after The Wall Street Journal beat “60 Minutes” to a version of the same story through an article based on Mr. Wigand’s testimony in a court case, “60 Minutes” belatedly broadcast its report on the matter.

Donald Shepard Hewitt was born in New York City on Dec. 14, 1922, and grew up just north of the city in New Rochelle, N.Y. His father was a classified advertising manager for The Boston American and later ran a company that sold circulars door-to-door. The young Don Hewitt found himself pulled toward two seemingly opposite poles as he logged endless hours in the local movie house.

“Through it all, I never knew which character I really wanted to be,” he wrote in his memoir, “Hildy Johnson, the reporter in ‘The Front Page,’ or Julian Marsh, the Broadway producer in ‘42nd Street.’ I would have settled for either one, with a slight nod toward Hildy Johnson. Because along with the movies, I had another passion: to be a reporter.”

The Path to Television

A year after enrolling in [New York University](#) on a track scholarship, Mr. Hewitt dropped out. His first job was as a copy boy at The New York Herald Tribune, for \$15 a week. In 1943, he enrolled at the Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, N.Y., in lieu of joining the Army. He eventually parlayed that experience into an assignment covering the merchant marine for Stars and Stripes, the military newspaper, which led him to London.

By 1945, he was back in New York working for The Herald Tribune when he was hired to become night editor of The Associated Press bureau in Memphis. His new wife, Mary Weaver, began to pine for New York, though, and they soon moved back. His new job as the night editor at a photo agency led to a lucky job offer: a friend told Mr. Hewitt that CBS, known primarily for its radio work, was looking for someone with picture experience to join its new effort to produce television programming.

“What-avision?” Mr. Hewitt recalled asking.

At the time, in 1948, the CBS studio was based over Grand Central Terminal. “So I went down to Grand Central Terminal, and damned if they didn’t have it, up on the top floor — little pictures in a box,” Mr. Hewitt wrote in “Tell Me a Story.” “They also had cameras and lights and makeup artists and stage managers and microphone booms just like in the movies, and I was hooked.”

Mr. Hewitt eventually separated from Ms. Weaver, who later died. A second marriage, to Frankie Childers, ended in divorce. He married Marilyn Berger in 1979; she had been a correspondent for The Washington Post and NBC News who later wrote obituaries for The New York Times.

She survives him, as do two sons, Jeffrey and Steven, from his first marriage; two daughters, Lisa Cassara and Jilian Hewitt, from his second marriage; and three grandchildren.

Though Mr. Hewitt remained under contract as a consultant to CBS after his departure from “60 Minutes,” he returned to prime time in 2007 as an executive producer for an hourlong program broadcast on a rival network, NBC. He did so in a capacity that might have made Julian Marsh proud. Mr. Hewitt conceived of a special that would broadcast the Radio City Christmas Spectacular largely intact, so that the viewer at home could watch the show as if in person.

Asked at the time how he had enjoyed the experience — in which he directed two hosts, Matt Lauer and [Meredith Vieira](#), posed with the Rockettes and managed nine high-definition cameras that Murrow and Edwards would have

hardly recognized — Mr. Hewitt said it had been the thrill of a very rich lifetime.

“I consider myself a guy who married ‘show biz’ and ‘news biz,’ ” he said.

Walter Goodman, who died in 2002, contributed reporting.