

# The shocking truth about three TV dinosaurs locked in a deadly fight to survive in the shrinking world of rabid reporting

by MICHAEL GILTZ

**E**xtra, "Inside Edition" and "Hard Copy" — the last of the once-mighty syndicated tabloid TV shows — are locked in a struggle to the death that would make the World Wrestling Federation proud.

Battle-scarred, 10-year veteran "Hard Copy" which even considered changing its name this season after dumping longtime anchor Terry Murphy and tweaking its format may be the weakest right now, but all three could stumble along for another year or two before more casualties mount.

Each show assumes it will be the last man standing; each wants to own it's the king of the hill, even if the hill looks smaller every day. As the long-time veteran who's worked on several of the shows put it: "That sure is dying on the vine."

Or, more accurately, that genre is flourishing in primetime.

"Dateline" is on four nights a week, "20/20" on three, "60 Minutes," "48 Hours" and "Fox Files" on one night each, with a "60 Minutes" junior on the way. There's also CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News Channel filling air time 4 hours a day.

"60 Minutes" senior, of course, just telecast a man being put to death — a stunt that would have been deemed if tabloid TVA had done it. (Aired to "stimulate debate," CBS said; not to garner the killer ratings that inevitably followed.)

Not surprisingly, ratings for tabloid TV shows have taken a dive. They compete with game shows and sitcom reruns for attention, but there's no doubt the surfeit of primetime news magazines has taken its toll.

"A Current Affair" — the granddaddy of syndicated news magazines — gleefully ruled the roost in the late '80s, regularly reaching 9 million homes with each broadcast. Now, according to Nielsen, "Extra" was No. 1 in the genre the last week of November with only a paltry 4.5 million people watching. "Inside Edition" is right at its heels with 4.2 viewers, while "Hard Copy" draws about 3.1 million. (One former staffer of that show — glad to be gone and back doing "real news" — fondly remembers the time they 8 million people a night tuned in.)

Granted, ratings for all shows, network and syndicated alike, are lower now. But even with the bar lowered (it takes a lot less to be considered a success nowadays), the tabloid TV shows that used to dominate the Top 10 now barely squeak into the Top 20, if that.

The bar hasn't been lowered just ratings-wise, either. "A Current Affair" literally changed the face of television. The stories people had to seek out furtively in their local supermarket checkout line were suddenly on TV for free.

Those stories — with the shocking! controversial! ways they were presented — seeped from the syndicated TV magazines to local TV and finally primetime.

Eye-catching video became the driving force for programmers. People scoffed at Fox's "When

# TABLOID DEATH MATCH!

"Judge Judy," which has rocketed in recent weeks (reaching 8.4 million viewers daily) and still growing. All of this makes the daily ritual of reading the overnight ratings a frightening affair for the syndicated news magazines.

"Getting those ratings in the morning was like getting a fix of heroin," says one former staffer of the old days. But with those figures far lower now, the highs are cheaper and quicker and the staffers soon hit bottom a lot harder.

So now that "American Journal" has been axed, which show will die next?

At "Extra" and "Inside Edition," they want to believe it's "Hard Copy." They claim not to even consider it one of their competitors.

And though most staffers point out they have friends at the other shows and that for another show to die is "bad for the genre," they immediately follow up with stories of "Hard Copy" personnel sending out resumes.

"Everyone knows this is its last year," bluntly says the former staffer who remembers the show's glory days.

Paramount executives Frank Kelly and Joel Berman — co-presidents of Paramount's syndicated arm — beg to differ, even though having a show fade into the sunset after ten years would hardly be unusual. They argue that none of the moves they've made were done for cost-cutting purposes.

They argue strenuously about the show's success in certain markets as a lead-in to local news and in other markets as a competitor against the second half of "The Tonight Show." Not as exciting as competing in the hour before primetime, to be sure. But in a market where shows like "Martha Stewart's Living" — which reaches 2.5 million people each day — are considered a promising success, it could be enough to guarantee survival for another year or two.

Indeed, instead of a sign that they're throwing in the towel on "Hard Copy," the changes they've made can be seen as a grudging recognition of the changing marketplace and the need to keep the show profitable now that it's taking in less revenue.

Whether all three shows struggle on for years or only one remains standing, there's no question the worm has turned.

Whether their time has simply gone or whether they've succeeded so well that they've put themselves out of business, it's fun to watch them tussle in the mud, like kids fighting over an old toy that no one else would want.

"Inside" touts its investigative pieces. "Extra" emulates the staccato abandon of yesteryear, complete with sweeps segments on "the world's smallest twins." And "Hard Copy" scoops everyone by riding the bandwagon of Jesse "The Body" Ventura into the governor's mansion of Minnesota.

The tabloid TV shows have to wonder: with a former wrestler succeeding in politics, maybe, just maybe, their work is done.

—Michael Giltz writes regularly for "Entertainment Weekly."



## WHEN 'A CURRENT AFFAIR' WAS KING

Who could forget these low-lives who 'starred' in notorious videos on the Fox Network's legendary tabloid show: (l-r) Ice skating knee-capper Tonya Harding, preppe murder Robert Chambers and the Long Island Lolita Amy Fischer.

Animals Attack" specials. Now all the networks program similar fare.

Supermarket weeklies — finding their best stories covered on "Dateline" and "20/20" — have already faltered under the pressure too. The Enquirer, for one, has plummeted 50 percent in circulation, from 4.4 million in '86 to 2.2 million today. Star magazine and Globe have seen similar drops.

**E**xcept for ratings, Geraldo Rivera was right when he said there's basically no difference between the networks' news magazines and tabloid TV — no difference in style and, increasingly, no difference in content.

That's no surprise to Steve Dunleavy — one of the stars of "A Current Affair" during its heyday, and a Post columnist. He notes the steady stream of editors, producers, and other behind-the-scenes personnel who've done good work and been snapped up by network news divisions looking to fill airtime.

"Whether it be 'Dateline,' '20/20' or '60 Minutes I or II,' they've certainly learned lessons from our genre," says Dunleavy. "That is

absolutely undeniable, though they'd be terrified to tell you that.

"Dateline," the way it's edited, is almost identical to 'A Current Affair,' says Dunleavy. "I actually saw a '60 Minutes' segment last year where they put music under some footage; they never would have done that years ago."

With networks chasing the same stories, that leaves the people being courted for interviews with an easy choice: a prime time segment on "Dateline" introduced by nice Jane Pauley or a slot on "Hard Copy" sometime during the day (4:30 in the afternoon? 12:00 at night?) cued by Kyle Kraska. How about "Inside Edition," with Deborah Norville? (And wasn't she the gal who elbowed Pauley off "Today"?)

Any small sum offered by the networks for the use of photos or video — far less than the upfront money offered by "Extra" and the others and, to be fair, far less frequently a part of the deal — just makes that decision easier.

Viewers have a lot of easy choices, too. They can watch the networks for sly takes on the scandal of the day and get their cheap thrills from

"Jerry Springer."

But just as damaging to the tabloid shows was another Jerry — namely Seinfeld. His smash sitcom steamrolled into syndication, snatching away key prime access positions — the lucrative, hotly desired 7 and 7:30 p.m. slots that lead into primetime. "Inside" and the others live from scandal to scandal, but "Seinfeld" makes hay even when nothing happens.

**J**ust when the first wave of off-network reruns ended, up popped Whoopi. Here in New York, for example, "Hard Copy" got pushed from WCBS/Ch. 2 at 7:30 (which bought Goldberg's hot new game show "Hollywood Squares") to WPIX/Ch. 11 at 1 p.m. That means less revenue for the show, but it's still in better shape here than "Inside Edition," which WCBS has stranded at 1:30 a.m.

With these shows moving out of prime access into afternoon slots, they're facing a slew of new competitors. Besides the countless talk shows, there's the hot new genre of court TV, spun off from golden-olde "People's Court," and led by red-hot