



# What's left when the Couric hype clears?

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By Peter Johnson, USA TODAY

NEW YORK — Katie Couric's debut as CBS News anchor tonight marks new territory for viewers.

For most of the past two decades — until a two-year period of anchor instability caused by retirement, ouster and death — evening news watchers had but three choices: NBC's Tom Brokaw, former CBS anchor Dan Rather and the late Peter Jennings on ABC.

Now viewers have three new choices: NBC's Brian Williams, ABC's Charles Gibson, and Couric.

How much of a part do their on-air personalities play on the evening news?

"We're dealing with news, and so in essence our content is king," says *ABC World News* producer Jon Banner. "But certainly it is important whether viewers are comfortable with the people who are delivering the news, whether they trust them, whether they in some way, shape or form identify with them.

"We are asking people to invite us into their living rooms every night, so it does play some role. But this is not *Friends*."

After commercials, Couric will share about 20 minutes of airtime with CBS News correspondents and interview subjects. Couric will have about seven minutes of airtime herself, just as Williams and Gibson do — quite a comedown from her 15 years on *Today*, when she shared three hours of interviews and chitchat with Matt Lauer, Ann Curry and Al Roker.

Donna Brooks, a management professor at Villanova School of Business, says that women in positions of leadership get "much closer scrutiny than men" and that Couric should act quickly to put her mark on *Evening News* "without losing her authenticity. She'll have a short honeymoon before people will start finding fault."

But Gibson, 63, who like Couric has switched to nights after a long a.m. tenure (18 years on ABC's *Good Morning America*), is skeptical that she'll be able to change much on *Evening News*, given the time constraints imposed on a half-hour news program.

"We've got a template of 50 years of these shows. Trying to vary that template has never been particularly successful," Gibson says. "I'm sort of interested in poking at what CBS does to try to find out what's under there. My suspicion is that all this talk is just so they can answer your questions. I think you'll see a pretty traditional news show."

But Erik Sorenson, who produced *Evening News* from 1993 to 1995 — the last time CBS tinkered with its format, by pairing Dan Rather with Connie Chung — says: "I suspect there will be a real discernible difference in Couric's newscast. I believe

she will project a noticeably different and more conversational tone, and her producers will present and organize the content in a way the audience will see as different."

Talk like that has raised expectations that Couric will be the ratings success that she was at *Today*, where she was credited with the morning show's record-breaking, 10-year winning streak.

But historically, as with morning news programs, network evening news ratings move slowly — the word "glacially" often surfaces — meaning chances are slim that Couric can catapult the perennial third-place *Evening News* ahead of *World News* or No. 1 *Nightly News* anytime soon.

Network news analyst Andrew Tyndall predicts that Couric, whom CBS is paying \$15 million a year, "won't do much for CBS' Nielsen ratings. But the whole point is to have her be the figurehead who'll lead CBS News into the new multimedia format, not to get viewers to race home from work early so they can be in front of their TV at 6:30."

Jim Lehrer, anchor of PBS' *NewsHour*, says the money and resources CBS is putting behind Couric and its flagship broadcast "is a huge step and flies in the face of all the conventional wisdom."

"CBS had a big choice," he says. "They could have decided, 'Wait a minute; we don't want to put our money on this. Maybe CBS will get out of the news business, put all our money in entertainment and let somebody else do the news.' A lot of people expected that, frankly, and they didn't do that. In fact, they went just the opposite, and they are accompanying this traditional station in the news world with a lot of new-media tentacles."

Fifteen years from now, Tyndall predicts, network newscasts "will still be alive and well, and millions of Americans will still be watching them in one form or another. It's really difficult to build a TV news operation from scratch. It takes a lot of experience (and) investment, and the people who are in the best position to be the leading distributors of news on video, news on demand and the online world are good at doing it now."

And after a decade in which the network morning shows, led by Couric, got all the attention, "the basket into which the networks are putting the eggs is the nightly news," Tyndall says. "They are not saying, 'Watch the *Today Show* or *Good Morning America* 24 hours a day.' They are saying, 'Watch *ABC World News* 24 hours a day.' They are convinced that if ever they are going to get people used to watching TV on their computers or on their cellphones or on their iPods, it is going to be watching hard news rather than watching fluff."

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By William Regan, AP

Katie Couric will assume the anchor chair at the *CBS Evening News* on Tuesday.

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