Napoli, Lisa, *Up All Night: Ted Turner, CNN, And the Birth of 24-Hour News*

New York: Abrams Press, 2020, 305 pages

David Lipson

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/2604>

DOI: 10.4000/inmedia.2604

ISSN: 2259-4728

Publisher

Center for Research on the English-Speaking World (CREW)

Electronic reference

David Lipson, "Napoli, Lisa, *Up All Night: Ted Turner, CNN, And the Birth of 24-Hour News*", *InMedia* [Online], 8.2. | 2020, Online since 22 October 2021, connection on 28 October 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/2604> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.2604>

This text was automatically generated on 28 October 2021.

© InMedia

Napoli, Lisa, *Up All Night: Ted Turner, CNN, And the Birth of 24-Hour News*

New York: Abrams Press, 2020, 305 pages

David Lipson

REFERENCES

Napoli, Lisa, *Up All Night: Ted Turner, CNN, And the Birth of 24-Hour News*, New York: Abrams Press, 2020, 305 pages.

- 1 “Barring satellite problems, we won’t be signing off until the world ends. We’ll be on, and we will cover the end of the world, live, and that will be our last event. We’ll play the national anthem only one time, on the first of June, and when the end of the world comes, we’ll play ‘Nearer My God to Thee’ before we sign off.”¹ Ted Turner made this promise when he launched Cable News Network (CNN) on June 1 1980. This quote among other tidbits of information about Ted Turner and the origin of CNN can be found in Lisa Napoli’s book *Up All Night: Ted Turner, CNN and The Birth of 24-Hour News* (Abrams Press, 2020).
- 2 As the title of her book indicates, Napoli’s book is centered on two main subjects: Ted Turner and the birth of CNN. The latter would engender the 24-hour news cycle, a major media revolution that would forever after alter the face of the TV news landscape.
- 3 However, her book does not follow the typical linear rags-to-riches story of the American self-made man who pulls himself up by his boot straps to conquer the world. It starts at the end of Turner’s career with what could objectively be considered the nadir or low-point. In the introductory chapter *March 2001*, Turner is giving a speech at Harvard in honor of receiving the Goldsmith Career Award for Excellence in Journalism. Described by the author as old and tired, the media mogul’s world had just disintegrated. He had just been ousted from CNN management and lost control of his networks due to the AOL-Time Warner merger, his third wife Jane Fonda had just left

him and he had lost a considerable amount of his fortune due to the stock market's reaction to the aforementioned merger. This initial introduction is bookended by the concluding pages of the book aptly titled *Afterword June 2000* that go back to revisit this same period where Turner is seen as a washed out has-been looking back on what he had created. Perhaps Napoli's choice to start the narrative just after the beginning of the new millennium was inspired by the beginning of Reese Schonfeld's book² which also took as its starting point the 20th anniversary of the founding of CNN?³ Yet Schonfeld's choice was a logical one considering that his book was published in 2001. Napoli's book, published in 2020, is much closer to CNN's 40th anniversary. Another explanation for this purposeful choice could be that Napoli meant to go against the grain of most biography/origin stories and deconstruct rather than construct the Turner myth while at the same time draw attention to Reese Schonfeld, the very first CNN president and the unsung hero of the founding of CNN. In any case, the 11 chapters sandwiched in between the two slices of the media mogul's fall from grace document Turner's own personal history and successful rise culminating with the creation and launch of CNN. Along with these biographical aspects of Turner's life the author also intertwines the history and evolution of TV as well as the news media.

- 4 In Chapter one "The Little Girl in the Well, 1949" the reader learns about the personal interest story of a little girl who has fallen into a well and the ensuing rescue operation involving the active participation of the community and the local news. The chapter highlights the attention drawn to the local event and the publicity for the emerging medium of television. "It was television history. Never before had it been possible to watch an event unfold, live, without physically being present....That people who had no connection to the family or the area had become so consumed by the drama was a jolting indicator that a mass medium had been born" (11). However, not only did it mark TV history but also the need for a possible 24-hour news channel to cover extensively such a story and the limits of the news media in 1949.
- 5 Chapter two "The Lunatic Fringe" takes us on a historical tour of TV and TV channels in the 1960s where "....the plum broadcast real estate, stations numbered two to thirteen on the powerful VHF, or 'very high frequency,' of the airwaves, had been doled out. Dials on most older televisions—that is, most televisions in operation—stopped at the number thirteen" (18). The chapter also introduces the reader to Jack Rice and Bill Tush. The former founded TV station WJRJ TV channel 17 located on the Ultra High Frequency (UHF) of the airwaves referred to as the "Lunatic Fringe" because of their limited range and thus limited viewership, and the latter would go on to be the future newsman for this channel. Turner then acquired it, diversifying his father's billboard business and planting the seeds for what would become CNN. The other strands that Napoli weaves into this chapter are the dramatic events of Turner's early life, his turbulent relationship with his alcoholic father, the trauma of his ailing sister who eventually died of Lupus at 17, his own personal battles with alcohol and his father's suicide when Ted was only 24. These events plus his own personal idiosyncrasies forged his character and drive. "The more people said something couldn't be done—or that Ted Turner couldn't do it—the deeper he plunged in. A wild risk taker was the perfect fit, perhaps the only fit, for a station on the lunatic fringe" (34). The chapter ends by building on this description of Turner as a crazy risk taker, recounting an incident where he climbed the broadcasting tower of channel 17 shouting that he wants to reach the moon.

- 6 Yes, Turner wants to reach the moon or more precisely outer space with a satellite as chapter three “Girdle ‘Round the Earth” focuses on the future capacity to broadcast the news immediately worldwide. The title is taken from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act II, Scene I, where Puck promises Oberon that he will travel at lightning speed around the earth in 40 minutes. So the chapter posits that Puck’s ‘girdle’ could also allow the news to travel this quickly as well. Technology was collapsing space and time already, from the invention of the telegraph, the telephone to that of the television. Yet television had its limits. For example, if you lived behind mountains or you were in an isolated rural area without a nearby big city that had a TV station you were not able to tune in to television. This was because the TV frequencies were beamed over “AT&T’s terrestrial superhighway” (43). Moreover, you could not beam a signal across the ocean. In 1945 the science fiction writer and futurist Arthur C. Clarke imagined the following solution: use a satellite as an extra-terrestrial relay. “Three repeater stations 120 degrees apart in the correct orbit could give television and microwave coverage to the entire planet.”⁴ The chapter then documents the ensuing technological milestones like the invention of the first Telstar satellite in 1962 and the first transatlantic televised communication between Europe and the United States via satellite on July 23, 1962 when Walter Cronkite said “Good evening Europe” (45). In the same chapter the author introduces another new character Maurice Wolfe Schonfeld aka Reese who at the time was a broadcast journalist at United Press Movie Tone News. In competition with the big three (ABC, CBS and NBC) networks, Reese realizes that the troika’s advantage is based on access not superior news product “Each paid \$25 million annually to the phone company for the use of its speedy information superhighway.” (41). It was these high transmission costs that had doomed the Dumont Network in 1955. The reader follows Reese’s career as his latest employer United Press Newsfilm is acquired by beer heir Joseph Coors an idealistic entrepreneur who had his own vision of creating a network with a conservative point of view. In 1974 he launched Television news or TVN employing among others Roger Ailes to help him run the news. The book does not dwell on what eventually became of TVN and Roger Ailes⁵ but instead focuses on Reese’s pursuit to allow TVN to have access to the Telstar satellite service that will lead to his encounter with Ted Turner.
- 7 When channel 17 was launched on January 1, 1970 Turner had chosen the call sign WTCG which stood for “Turner Communications Group” though Ted claimed it meant “Watch This Channel Grow!” the title given to chapter 4. The action in this chapter takes place a few years before the meeting between Schonfeld and Turner in chapter 3. The author unravels the CNN origin story but in a more traditional Bildungsroman narrative arc by exploring the early days of channel 17 when it was a scrappy young UHF “lunatic fringe” TV station rated number 4 out of 4 among the local UHF channels. The sordid working conditions and shoestring budget are described in painstaking detail as well as the innovative and aggressive approaches Turner used to “transform channel 17 from ‘shit to shinola’ as he described it” (61) and make the channel grow. He decided to occupy all 24 hours of the day with TV programs on the channel instead of signing off late at night. He broadcast reruns, old movies nobody wanted, Georgia wrestling and even became the first UHF station to carry Major League baseball signing a contract with the Atlanta Braves. Channel 17 even carried out a master coup in landing a deal with the infamous direct advertisement Ginsu knife infomercial franchise. Napoli then chronicles how Turner tasked Bill Tush to become the first news anchor for channel 17. Having absolutely no experience Tush winged it and in the end

settled on doing a light-hearted version of the news, constantly breaking the fourth wall, joking with the cameramen while on air, and doing self-deprecating things at the same time he read the news. Chapter 4 then explores the budding cable revolution and especially the game changing ruling that would lift channel 17 out of obscurity: “the FCC handed down an industry-altering edict. Cable operators, they decreed, could import the nearest independent station as a bonus offering to their customers.... Within a year, its viewership would triple” (80).

- 8 If the previous chapters had not made it clear that Ted Turner, “the mouth of the south” (88) is an outsized character, a reckless risk taker, a delusional egomaniac and according to others just downright wacko, chapter five “Captain Outrageous” explicitly makes the case. Knowing absolutely nothing about baseball he decides to purchase the Atlanta Braves. The rest of the chapter is about his antics as the Braves’ new owner, his subsequent equally dubious purchase of the basketball team the Atlanta Hawks who like the Braves were in last place, his non-stop philandering often while drunk, and ends by recounting how he defended the America’s Cup in 1977 beating Australia 4-0. The one constant in Turner’s life was his love of water and skill at sailing. After the win Turner was once again drunk.
- 9 After the wild antics of Turner in the previous chapter, chapter six “No News Is Good News” starts off by picking up the narrative arc of Reese Schonfeld that was left hanging in chapter 3. It is 1975, TVN is history and Schonfeld now works for the Independent TV News Association (ITNA), a wire service that provides footage and filmed stories from around the nation to nine subscribing independent stations. However, Turner’s channel resisted because Ted felt that news was depressing and that people wanted escapism. The author continues the Schonfeld saga by introducing newsmen Reese met at ITNA, Ted Kavanau, Daniel Schorr and Burt Reinhardt, three additional supporting characters in the CNN origin arc who will help Schonfeld later launch CNN. But before that happens, Napoli presents the next episode of the Turner saga. Ted has just had a personal epiphany realizing that news is not such a bad idea after all, because he would not have to pay for the rights, thus making it cheaper than entertainment. He decides to start a 24-hour news cable network and promptly seeks out the only newsmen he knows who could make it work: Reese Schonfeld. He agrees to come on board and with Ted they seek support from the 5000 other existing cable operators. Unfortunately, Turner’s Captain outrageous persona precedes him: “The TV critic for the Charlotte Observer...summed up everyone’s misgivings about Ted’s foray into broadcast journalism saying it was like ‘Attila the Hun deciding he’s going to do a summer camp for the elderly’” (128). Turner will have to launch CNN alone without their support.
- 10 Chapter 7 “Every Drop of Blood” is about even more difficult obstacles standing in the way of Ted’s project. The title refers to one of the most challenging ones. The satellite responder provided by RCA went missing three months before the launch of CNN and RCA would not provide any of the stranded channels access on their other two satellites. This would mean that upon CNN’s launch they would be beaming from another satellite that could not be received by anyone because they were tuned only to the RCA satellite. Or as the author puts it RCA was “offering up an eight-track tape machine on which to play an LP when your turntable died” (154). This launch into obscurity meant CNN would be doomed to failure. Upon hearing the bad news from RCA Turner flew into a rage: “I’m a small company, and you guys may put me out of

business. This is my death if you do this to me. This is my blood you're getting. For every drop of blood I shed," he roared, "you will shed a barrel" (154). Other notable obstacles included a moment when Turner was thought to be dead after a dangerous European yacht race whose stormy conditions had decimated two thirds of the competition and killed 19 participants. In the end, not only did Ted survive, but he won the race, serving up a neat allegory for the future launch of CNN. Aside from the problems, channel 17 would also have to undergo a huge cultural shift. Bill Tush, whom Turner referred to as his "low-budget Walter Cronkite" (138), would still have a job presenting the news "but the unorthodox news shenanigans simply had to stop. No more reading the headlines in a bunny suit. No more sermons from Brother Gold; goodbye, special reports from the News Chicken. From that day forward, Bill Tush would have to play it straight." (139).

- 11 Chapter eight "Reese's Pieces" focuses on this period of transition and the actions carried out by the future president of CNN Reese Schonfeld. Ted had given him free rein to cobble or "piece" together the future team at CNN and he promptly went to work hiring colleagues who could work as guerilla newsmen to defend this new cable David that would take on the Big Three Goliaths. College interns who would work for peanuts were brought in. New hires with previous substance abuse or harassment problems, referred to by Reese as "rehab projects" (170), were welcome as well.
- 12 Chapter nine "Until the End of the World" is devoted essentially to the successful launch of CNN on June 1 1980. The title itself is a reference to a doomsday video that Turner created for CNN to play during the apocalypse.⁶ With the launch only minutes away Ted Turner pulled out and read a modified version of a poem written by Edward Kessler that would serve as the CNN mission statement.⁷ The chapter ends with a quote from the *Atlanta Constitution* journalist Dick Williams that summarizes the initial skepticism surrounding CNN at that time: "The question 'Will Turner pull it off?' has been replaced by 'How long do you think it will last?'" (206).
- 13 Chapter ten follows the evolution of CNN as a mere curiosity, losing money in the first few months of its existence to reporting on Reagan's assassination attempt⁸ a full 4 minutes before all the other networks, a dramatic event tailor-made for a 24-hour news channel. This incident demonstrated that CNN was starting to become a successful domestic news force. It also started to develop international outreach as the title of the chapter "Duck Hunting with Fidel" indicates. People were picking up the satellite signal of CNN even in Cuba and Fidel Castro decided to invite Ted for a visit. During the visit Ted discovered that he and Castro were not so different: "Along with an eye for beautiful women not their wives, the two men, it turned out, had a lot more in common. Each feared Armageddon and felt the world was currently on the verge of catastrophe. Each voraciously consumed the stories of famous military leaders and battles, and each was particularly fascinated by, even obsessed with, Alexander the Great" (226).
- 14 Chapter 11 "The Little Girl in the Well, 1987" neatly circles back to a similar incident in 1949 recounted in chapter 1. However, 38 years later this would no longer be seen as just a local event but a worldwide production seen by millions stressing the evolution of technology and the reduction of space: "A symphony of horns alerted the people of Midland that one of their own was safe. But the reverie was superfluous. No one needed to go outside to know what had happened. Thanks to television, all over town and all around the planet, millions of people already knew. That night, CNN scored its highest

ratings ever” (237). Indeed, CNN had become a global phenomenon: “‘They are watching us in Moscow right now, in Havana, in London,’ Ted bragged as deal after intoxicating deal was signed to beam CNN around the globe—Canada, Australia, Japan, Mexico, China” (234). This chapter informs the reader of two other important developments in the Turnerverse: Reese Schonfeld had been fired by Turner 5 years earlier in 1982 and Turner had now settled down with his third wife Jane Fonda.

- 15 “Afterword: June 2000” takes place during CNN’s 20th anniversary celebration and Napoli continues the narrative of Ted’s fall from grace. This last chapter like the introduction “March 2001” revisits Ted’s loss of control of the company he built and the departure of Jane Fonda, described in chapter 11 as “the ultimate symbol of success: a movie star” (234). In this backdrop of Turner twilight, an antihero, or as he described himself “bastard at the wedding” (241), emerges from the shadows. Reese Schonfeld has come back to celebrate CNN’s 20th anniversary and reminisce. He meets old friends and notes how many of them he hired. Reese is finally able to come to terms with his past: “Unable to sleep, twenty years to the day after his greatest achievement, he sat up in the shadowy room and cried” (245). The book ends by contrasting “a now-frail eighty-one-year-old” (246) Ted Turner, the old WTCG building about to be demolished, an old tree that is red-tagged, with the revolutionary spark that produced CNN or to put it succinctly: People and things fade away but an idea is timeless.
- 16 *Up All Night* is a book about the origin of CNN and 24-hour news rather than what CNN has become today. So, for academics who would like to learn about the beginnings of TV news, the early history of CNN and cable TV, this book is for you. If you want to know more about Ted Turner, the playboy billionaire, a master yachtsman who is often compared to “Howard Hughes,” this book is also for you.⁹ However, if you are not interested in the first seven years of CNN (1980-1987) but the last 33 of its 40 year existence you will be disappointed. Anyone interested in reading about CNN’s coverage of the first Gulf war live from Baghdad in 1991, referred to as “the journalistic equivalent of walking on the moon”¹⁰ where CNN was the only news outlet able to communicate from inside Iraq, should look elsewhere. If you are doing research on the terrorist attack of 9/11, you will not find a mention of it not even on the timeline at the end of the book. The emergence of serious 24-hour news cable competition (Fox on the right, MSNBC on the left) has also been totally glossed over, getting just barely a sentence on page 242.¹¹ It is also regrettable that there is no mention of the current polarized media news landscape, especially during the Trump presidency, despite the 2020 publication date. Trump went to war against the mainstream media and specifically CNN accusing them of being the enemy of the people and calling them “fake news”. He attacked and berated its reporters and news anchors,¹² tweeted a doctored video of him wrestling a man with a CNN logo on his face to the ground,¹³ and promised to prevent their merger with AT&T during his campaign¹⁴ (the merger actually took place in 2019 but this was another major event neglected by the book and given only two sentences in the “Afterword”).
- 17 Yet despite, the above criticisms, this is an interesting fascinating look at Ted Turner and the making of CNN. Napoli’s book is meticulously researched and documented with an extensive bibliography, notes section, footnotes, and index. The *tour de force*, though, is that she has delivered all of this while keeping up the readers’ interest by crafting a central CNN origin narrative and introducing and deploying different characters that she weaves throughout. Perhaps the most compelling one is Reese Schonfeld, CNN’s

first president who created the blueprint for CNN at the ITNA.¹⁵ Napoli writes “Aside from the cast of characters and the theatrics, his most enduring legacy had been in upending the conventional order of the television universe and the news business” (234). The sentence refers to Ted Turner but after reading the whole book one can wonder to what extent it also refers to Schonfeld.

NOTES

1. Michael Ballaban quoting Ted Turner, *Jalopnik*, “This Is The Video CNN Will Play When The World Ends” Jan 5, 2015.
<https://jalopnik.com/this-is-the-video-cnn-will-play-when-the-world-ends-1677511538> accessed May 15 2021. See also chapter 7, 160.
2. Reese Schonfeld, *Me and Ted Against the World: The Unauthorized Story of the Founding of CNN* (New York: Cliff Street, 2001).
3. *Ibid*, 1.
4. Arthur C. Clarke, Letters to the editor “Peacetime Uses for V2” *Wireless World*, February 1945, 58.
<http://lakdiva.org/clarke/1945ww/> accessed May 16 2021.
5. To learn about what became of TVN and Roger Ailes see Gabriel Sherman’s *The Loudest Voice in the Room: How the Brilliant, Bombastic Roger Ailes Built Fox News—and Divided a Country* (New York: Random House, 2014).
6. See first note Michael Ballaban quoting Ted Turner
7. You can read the mission statement here. A.J. Katz “CNN Launched 40 Years Ago Today, June 1, 2020. <https://www.adweek.com/tvnewser/cnn-launched-40-years-ago-today/442979/> accessed May 21, 2021
8. John Hinckley Jr. shot president Reagan on March 30, 1981
9. For those interested in an in-depth account of Turner’s early life and career see *Citizen Turner: The Wild Rise of an American Tycoon*, Harcourt Brace, 1995
10. Robert Wiener, *Live from Baghdad: Making News at Ground Zero* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).
11. See Richard Hack, *Clash of the Titans: How the Unbridled Ambition of Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch Has Created Global Empires that Control What We Read and Watch Each Day* (New York: New Millennium Press, 2003).
12. The most notable example was when the White House suspended Jim Acosta’s press pass after a heated exchange with Trump. See “White House suspends press pass of CNN’s Jim Acosta after his testy exchange with Trump” *The Washington Post*, Nov 8 2018
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/11/08/white-house-suspends-press-pass-cnns-jim-acosta-after-testy-exchange-with-trump/>
accessed May 20 2021
13. Michael M. Grynbaum, “Trump tweets video of him wrestling ‘CNN’ to the ground” *New York Times*, July 2 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/02/business/media/trump-wrestling-video-cnn-twitter.html> accessed May 20 2021
14. Bess Levin, “Did the White House just use the Time Warner AT&T Deal to Threaten CNN?” *The Hive* August 8 2017 <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/07/donald-trump-cnn-time-warner-merger> accessed May 20 2021

15. “ITNA was the laboratory in which we proved that news could be a business unto itself. It was the blueprint for CNN.” Reese Schonfeld in Reese Schonfeld. *Me and Ted Against the World*, 43.

AUTHORS

DAVID LIPSON

Université de Strasbourg