

The Future of Broadcasting

Broadcast talent agent Richard Leibner '59 pays close attention to the evolution of the industry he helped pioneer 50 years ago.

By Caitlin Mack '12, '13 (T5)

LONG RECOGNIZED AS A RESPECTED PREDICTOR of cultural shifts in the news industry, **Richard Leibner '59** is used to adapting to the constantly changing national media landscape. In response to the growth of online news and competitive cable channels in the past decade, Leibner predicts that competition among broadcast news outlets will only increase in years to come.

"There will be a shakeout of a lot of small start-ups and newer media outlets like *The Huffington Post*, which get a tremendous amount of traffic," says Leibner, the founder and president of the talent agency N.S. Bienstock. "Local television and regional television news will also gain importance as people age and the demographic changes."

Leibner, who represents over 600 broadcast professionals, including stars like Anderson Cooper, Bill O'Reilly, and Robin Roberts, says that audiences for network broadcast news have declined, particularly after the 2008 recession.

"Shows used to reach audiences between 20 and 28 million people a night; now it's closer to 6 or 7 million," he says. "In the last 10 years, cable news channels like MSNBC, Al-Jazeera America, and Fox have grown—they command smaller audiences but are still huge drivers of news."

N.S. Bienstock, which will celebrate its 50th anniversary this year, has also had to adapt to changes in the news industry. In January, the company became a unit of major Hollywood firm United Talent Agency, a shift that Leibner says will give his clients "more reach and access into the ever-changing media and entertainment landscape."

In recognition of their own talent for staying ahead of that changing landscape, Leibner and his wife and business partner, Carole Cooper, were among 11 industry leaders honored last fall at the 11th annual Giants of Broadcasting ceremony at New York City's Gotham Hall. Other nominees at the yearly event, sponsored by the Library of American Broadcasting, included Disney/ABC Television Group President Anne Sweeney, television personality and *Jeopardy!* game-show host Alex Trebek, *60 Minutes* correspondent Morley Safer,

and Black Entertainment Television (BET) founder Robert Johnson, and others.

According to Leibner, the intersection of media, entertainment, and news has shifted over the years. Satirical news shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* air in prime time and ABC's *Good Morning, America* is a "lighter broadcast that focuses more on pop culture, not hard news."

"The success of *60 Minutes* as a cash cow changed attitudes toward news as something you do for prestige and public spirit," he says. "Dick Salant (former president of CBS News) used to ask at the morning meeting, 'What does the public need to

license, Leibner went into business in 1964 with his father, Sol Leibner, and insurance agent Nate Bienstock, whose clients included legendary CBS correspondent Eric Sevareid and several other broadcast journalists.

"At that time, news was beginning to reach more people in a vivid way," says Leibner. "You could watch developments in the civil rights movement, the race to the moon, and the Vietnam War at dinnertime. The day Kennedy was shot, the country just stopped and watched the news."

Leibner has garnered respect for his command of the broadcast industry and for his attention to his clients' interests. Known for



know?' Now it's become more 'What does the public want to know?'"

Leibner questions the quality of online news, which, while providing the world with instantly available information, generally doesn't adhere to the editorial codes that traditionally existed in television and print. "The Internet has no standards," he says. "I don't think this is healthy unless they find a way to monetize it so they can pay for serious investigative journalism."

Equipped with a degree from Rochester, followed by a master's degree and a CPA

▲ **INDUSTRY GIANTS: Spouses and business partners, Leibner and Cooper were honored at last fall's 11th annual Giants of Broadcasting ceremony, sponsored by the Library of American Broadcasting.**

working hard for his clients, he negotiated a then unprecedented 10-year, \$22 million contract for Dan Rather to replace retiring *CBS Evening News* anchor Walter Cronkite in 1980. He also helped win a \$6-million-a-year deal for ABC's Diane Sawyer in 1994. CBS News special correspondent Bernard Goldberg once said that Leibner was "like a spouse, except he knows some clients *better* than a spouse."

Despite a long career and extensive industry accomplishments, Leibner still finds wonder in the evolving world of media. "From the very beginning this industry has fascinated me, and there's so much more knowledge now," he says. **R**

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