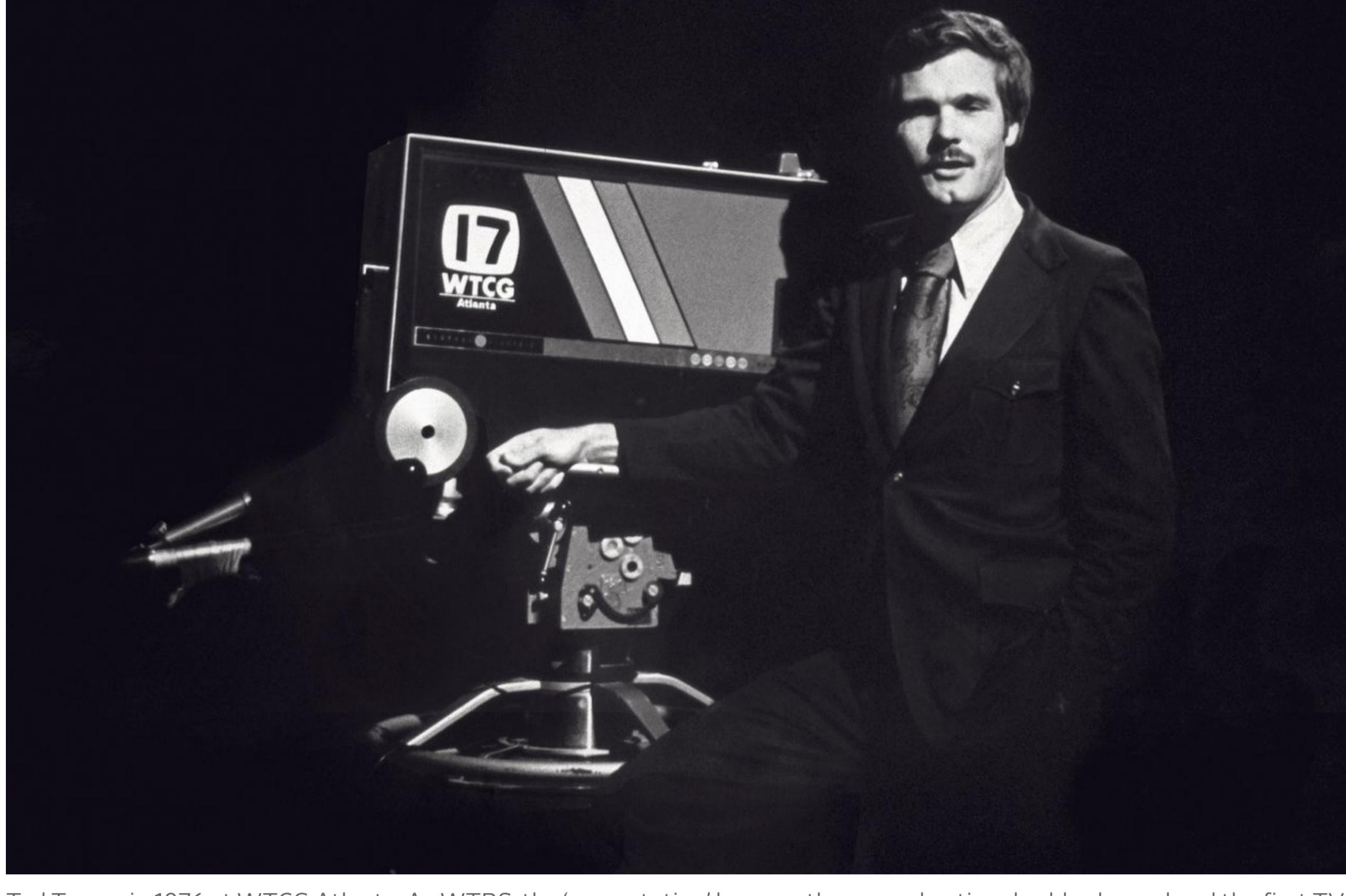




BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

‘Up All Night’ Review: Headlines, Nonstop

Forty years ago, Ted Turner’s revolutionary Cable News Network changed the way America gets television news. What was once a half-hour nightly appointment is now water from the tap.



Ted Turner in 1976 at WTBS Atlanta. As WTBS, the ‘superstation’ became the second national cable channel and the first TV broadcast delivered by satellite. PHOTO: TED TURNER ENTERPRISES

By Edward Kosner

Updated May 15, 2020 5:31 pm ET

SAVE PRINT TEXT

33

If a Mount Rushmore of American journalism is ever carved out of some Western mountain, Ted Turner’s gap-toothed grin is unlikely to be up there next to Hearst, Pulitzer and whichever other worthy makes the cut. Yet the often-buffoonish billionaire “Mouth of the South” is as responsible as any other pioneer for the way Americans get their news today.

Mr. Turner is 81 now and suffering from an uncommon form of dementia, but his place in the pantheon is secure. His harum-scarum, visionary creation of the Cable News Network in 1980 irrevocably changed television news and has had a tangible impact on print journalism as well. Print-media newsrooms are still festooned with TV sets tuned to CNN, and every airport has the cable channel—or one of its competitors—visible in the boarding areas.



Anchor Wolf Blitzer and Muppet-pundit Kermit the Frog on CNN in 2011. PHOTO: CNN

UP ALL NIGHT

By Lisa Napoli

Abrams Press, 306 pages, \$27

much of its daytime news coverage was straightforward. Fox quickly developed a mammoth audience (in cable-news terms) and, soon enough, MSNBC steered itself into the liberal lane. CNN, too, inched away from its middle-of-the-road groove and took on a liberal tinge.

These channels soon realized that it’s more cost-effective and appealing to fill many of their endless hours of programming with the opinions of “contributors” instead of straight-news coverage. The result is that three of America’s most influential news sources have a far more partisan flavor than was the norm when the broadcast networks set the tone. Influential newspapers, too, have loosened their definition of straight-news writing.

On June 1, CNN will celebrate the 40th anniversary of its first broadcast. To mark the milestone, Lisa Napoli has written “Up All Night,” an artful, anecdote-rich account of Mr. Turner and CNN. It’s an entertaining chronicle full of sketches of the odd pro on the Turner team and flashbacks to the big stories at the dawn of TV news, like the death of 3-year-old Kathy Fiscus in a California well in 1949. Ms. Napoli’s book reminds us how much inadvertence, hard work and good luck figure in the birth of innovations like CNN.

There have been almost a dozen books by and about Mr. Turner and his cable empire—which included “superstation” WTBS, the commercial-free Turner Classic Movies and Headline News. Most readers have some idea of Mr. Turner’s wacky antics and successes as a champion yachtsman and broadcaster. Ms. Napoli, a journalist who started her career as an intern at CNN in 1981, presents an indelible portrait of the media mogul in all his profane, cartoonish glory.

As a boy raised in Savannah, Ga., obstreperous young Ted was bundled off to boarding school at age 4. He was regularly flogged into line with a razor strap by his father, Ed, a drunken dandy who made a fortune splashing advertising billboards throughout the southeast. Rejected by Harvard, Ted went to Brown, where he serenaded a Jewish fraternity with Nazi songs and sent a menacing note from the “KKK” to black students. After Brown tossed him, he fled to Florida to sail, so broke that he had to use a telephone book for toilet paper. Then came a stint in the Coast Guard and, reluctantly, a job working for his father, part of whose business he retrieved when Ed Turner blew out his brains at 52. Ted Turner put a coda to his first marriage when he rammed his soon-to-be-ex-wife’s boat to win a race; philandered throughout a second; then eventually married Jane Fonda, lavishing a \$100 million settlement on her when she left him after 10 years.

Reflecting on his career years later, he observed: “I was like Columbus when he left Spain for the new world. He didn’t know where he was going when he started, he didn’t know where he was when he got there, and he didn’t know where he’d been when he got back.”

The Turner media empire began in 1970 with Channel 17, a ramshackle independent UHF-TV station in Atlanta. Mr. Turner programmed it with chicken-fried schlock—live wrestling events, reruns of “The Andy Griffith Show,” countless old movies and a brief news segment hosted by a jokey news reader often partnered with a dog in coat and tie. Ms. Napoli deftly captures the antic quality of these early days, as Bill Tush, the anchor clown, introduces himself to the audience: “Here I am, sitting inside your TV set with all the news.” Almost by accident, Mr. Turner started transmitting his signal to some of the pioneering cable systems around the region. The station’s audience boomed and orders began flooding in for the Ginsu knife sets and other gimcracks he advertised. In time, ugly duckling Channel 17 molted into WTBS, the superstation that would carry the Atlanta Braves (which he eventually bought), the Atlanta Hawks (ditto) and more—seen all around the U.S. and beyond.

The Federal Communications Commission had been very lenient with the nascent cable industry, but by the late 1970s Mr. Turner began to fear that his cash cow might be choked by new regulation. It dawned on him that one kind of programming the feds would never restrict was news. “No news is good news,” he used to proclaim. “I hate the news. . . I’ll never do news.” He quickly changed his tune and soon began preaching that round-the-clock news coverage would rescue American democracy and avert nuclear war.

NEWSLETTER SIGN-UP

Books

Be the first to find out what’s new and what’s good. Get the weekend book reviews before the weekend.

PREVIEW SUBSCRIBE

With manic zeal, he raised money—often begging on his knees to seal the deal—and recruited producers schooled in improvisational local news and syndication. He struck out trying to lure Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather for star power and had to settle for cranky CBS veteran Daniel Schorr. He bought an abandoned country club in suburban Atlanta and hired a pal with no television experience to design his studios, which were filled with the latest in control boards and tape-editing machines. Kids fresh out of college wound up doing much of the work beyond the anchor desks.

As CNN was about to go live, disaster struck: The state-of-the-art satellite that was going to beam the channel to the nation was launched—and promptly disappeared. At the last minute, Mr. Turner got his channel a place on a backup satellite and at 6 p.m. on June 1, 1980, CNN went live from its basement studio. The first reviews were favorable and the exhausted pioneer staff rejoiced. “Now,” writes Ms. Napoli, “they just had to do what they’d just done, over and over again.”

Less than a year later the fledgling news network, still losing \$2 million a month, instantly came of age. A gunman shot Ronald Reagan outside the Washington Hilton after the president made a speech to a union group. CNN had been covering the speech and beat the broadcast networks to the news by 4 minutes. Then anchorman Bernard Shaw stayed with the story while the networks, short on updates, had to cut back and forth to their regular soap operas.

“News’ no longer meant reporting an event in its aftermath,” writes Ms. Napoli. “Forevermore, news would mean following an endless shower of unfolding details, right before your very eyes. News, in other words, had become sports.”

And that’s the way it is, as Walter Cronkite liked to say.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

SHOW CONVERSATION (33) ▼

SPONSORED OFFERS

WALMART: Walmart coupon: \$10 off all departments

KOHL’S: 20% off your entire order with Kohl’s coupon

EXPEDIA: Expedia promo: 50% off fully-refundable hotel bookings

EBAY: Up to 15% off branded sneakers & more with eBay coupon

HOME DEPOT: 10% off furniture using Home Depot coupon code

TARGET: Free \$75 gift card - Target promotion



The only TV that creates its own light. Learn More

RECOMMENDED VIDEOS

- Joe Biden Picks Kamala Harris as Running Mate
- Russia Registers World’s First Coronavirus Vaccine
- Trump Announces Israel, UAE Will Establish Diplomatic Relationship
- Police Body-Camera Footage Reveals New Details of George Floyd Killing
- This 30-Ton Robot Could Help Scientists Produce the Crops of the Future

WSJ MEMBER MESSAGE

Press a Button and This Plane Lands Itself

Garmin’s ‘auto-land’ capabilities take over in the event of a pilot’s medical emergency. Discover its potential impact on the future of transportation.

READ MORE

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

- Suburban Home Prices Are Rising. But So Are Most Urban Home Prices
- Stir-Crazy Travelers Are Ordering Airline Food to Relive the Flying Experience
- What Happens to All of the Unsold Clothes?
- ‘The Gold Standard’: Why Chinese Startups Still Flock to the U.S. for IPOs
- New U.S. Coronavirus Cases Tick Up Again as Back-to-School Worries Intensify
- WSJ News Exclusive | Beset by Coronavirus, Health Authorities Brace for Flu Season
- WSJ News Exclusive | China’s Xi Speeds Up Inward Economic Shift
- Are Florida Schools Reopening During Coronavirus? Parents Can’t Tell as State and Districts Fight
- Israel, U.A.E. Agree to Establish Formal Diplomatic Relationship
- Legitimate Businesses Are Snared in Hunt for Pandemic-Loan Scammers

BACK TO TOP ▲