

Nov 04, 2016 by [Mark Dillen](#)

“Uncle” Walter and the American Image ^[1]

"Uncle" seems almost condescending — I don't mean it so.

Walter Cronkite was more than an avuncular presence in American homes. He was a serious newsman at a time when TV news was being invented, and we were all a bit in awe of the new medium and its ability to broadcast images as well as news. The image that Cronkite presented of himself (along with the news) was trusted and familiar in American households because it was unadorned and un-retouched — "reality" TV before the term came to mean something else entirely. This is why so many of the tributes and obituaries in recent days have sounded nostalgic for the Cronkite era in American news and society. There is a yearning by many for broadcast news that is plain-spoken and factual, and not the product of gossip, emotion or speculation.

We all see the drawbacks in the way we currently report the news and the alarming demise of once-trusted media as well as their "newsmen." *The New York Times* reported today on the near-death agreement of journalists at the *Boston Globe* to accept wage cuts from its owner, The Times Company. The *NYT* account called the *Globe* "venerable." Which news media truly deserve to be called "venerable" today?

If it is true that a country eventually gets the kind of government it deserves, then it is certainly the case that a democracy gets the kind of news media that its citizens want and support. Murrow and CBS News lost battles with their network but the Murrow-Cronkite generation never retreated from its ideal that to do their job meant to gather the news and convey it, without artifice. Somewhere along the line, as the media became more image-conscious and fast, we stopped demanding the content that "Uncle Walter" and his team provided. What we are left with, too often, is image and celebrity, not substance and fact. It is, sadly, our own doing.

Published in Foreign Policy Association's Blog: "[Public Diplomacy: The World Affairs Blog Network](#)", co-hosted by the USC Center on Public Diplomacy.
