Koppel criticizes journalism's direction: Longtime ABC news show anchor receives Edward R. Murrow award at WSU

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By William L. Spence of the Tribune The Lewiston Tribune

PULLMAN - Former network news anchor Ted Koppel prescribed a healthier diet for the American public Friday, saying people need more unbiased, substantive news coverage and less "candy" journalism.

Koppel, who spent 25 years as anchor of ABC's "Nightline" news show, was in Pullman to receive the 2011 Edward R. Murrow lifetime achievement award at Washington State University.

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Prior to giving the keynote address, he met with local reporters and students. The first question was about his thoughts on the most pressing issue facing journalists today.

"The first thing we have to do is get back in the business of giving the American public what they need to hear - and what they need to hear is nonpartisan news about issues of real importance," he said. "That means giving them less of the candy news that they've been getting over the past few years."

Koppel acknowledged this change in diet will depend largely on consumers themselves.

"If people are satisfied with lots of stories about missing blondes in the Caribbean or about Hollywood stars who are trying to dry out for the 15th time ... if that's what passes for important news in this country," he said, then that's what media outlets will continue to deliver.

"To the degree that Americans really do have an appetite for good, solid reporting, they need to support organizations and programs that do that," Koppel said.

National Public Radio is a prime example. It may be perceived as liberal, he said - and to some extent he agreed with the characterization - but "it also does a terrific job putting out objective news. 'Frontline' does a brilliant job of covering important issues."

"I think it would be a national tragedy if NPR and public television cease to exist" due to congressional funding cuts, Koppel said.

While recognizing the need to do "softer" stories that have greater public appeal and that help boost television ratings, Koppel said the industry has gone too far in that direction. In particular, he criticized the major networks for cutting back on the number of foreign bureaus they staff.

"Thirty, 40 years ago, when I was a correspondent, I probably had 25 to 30 ABC News colleagues who were foreign correspondents, who were overseas all the time," he said. "These days, I'd be surprised if ABC has five foreign correspondents."

That change was largely driven by economics, he said, but deregulation during the Reagan years also had an effect.

"The Federal Communications Commission used to hold the threat of a suspended license over the heads of broadcasters who didn't do a better job of covering the news," Koppel said. "That's totally gone today; there is no such threat. They haven't suspended a license in the past 30 years.

"Despite what you hear about government agencies intruding too much in our lives, as far as the FCC is concerned it's become a toothless lion. It does nothing in terms of enforcing what the public needs are."

These industry trends are having an effect on the level of political discourse in the country, he said, which has descended, if not to a new low, then at least a new low for recent years.

"I think that's largely a function of television and radio talk shows that really just act as echo chambers for partisan broadcasts," Koppel said. "That may be entertaining, but it's not good journalism. ... If you only watch news that reflects the political bias you share, you're depriving yourself of an important part of what the news media is capable of delivering."

Rather than a problem to be avoided, Koppel said providing a healthier news diet for Americans is every journalist's responsibility.

"We're supposed to be alerting the American public to the issues that will impact their lives," he said.

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