



difficult now that Harvey [Kirck, Robertson's former co-anchor] is gone, to break away from the desk for a night and get out onto a story. Because what all broadcast organizations perceive they want in an anchor is someone who is going to be there five nights a week, telling you what went on that day. You develop a relationship with the audience, and you become a habit to the audience.

Surveys prove that people relate more readily to one person anchoring every night than to five different people each night or each week . . . that being the nature of the beast we're working in, we have to comply with that when we take on the position. I knew what I was in for when I took on the anchoring but I wanted to do it because I felt that properly done it could bring together all of the disciplines that I had learned over the years. There is writing, there is reporting to a certain extent, and there is a large presentation factor involved.

Even though people think it's just a talking head who works for 20 minutes a night, I know and everybody in the business knows, that it really has to be more than just that if you're going to last for a while. If you're just in it for the purpose of going on the air and looking pretty five nights a week then I don't think you are going to be around very long.

And those people usually don't last too long because the audience is pretty sophisticated. They know when someone has made a commitment to what she or he is doing; they can tell. We're not in the beginning years of television anymore, we're now in a highly sophisticated television age and people relate differently to TV now. They're not prepared to take anyone on face value; they want to know something about what that person is and what they represent.

EXCAL: But do most anchors have the same degree of responsibility that you have?

ROBERTSON: I think it varies, from what I understand. In the United States most anchors are editors or senior editors. In fact, Dan Rather of CBS News is called the managing editor. It's not possible for one person to run the entire show because in television there are too many elements to a show . . . somebody, and this is my function, has to have an overview of the whole thing and has to be responsible for the straight copy stories as well. I also follow some stories right through to the end. I write a lot of on-camera copy and also edit the other material.

EXCAL: How would you describe the operation at CTV News?

ROBERTSON: This is a 24-hour news operation so when we finish at night [after 11 p.m.], the first person from *Canada AM* arrives, and the newsroom is literally functioning all day. Then at about two or three a.m. more editors come in and by five the whole staff is there including the producers, photo editors, and hosts. That gives way at nine o'clock to the assignment desk of the *CTV National News* . . . They're in contact with correspondents overseas and in Canada and we are watching the wires—Canadian Press, Associated Press, Reuter—to see what's moving.

They're also watching the networks. They're watching the American telecasts to see what they're putting on their shows the early part of the evening as we have contracts with all three American networks which allow us to use any of their material on our show.

They [the people at the assignment desk] draw the big picture for everything and put our people on the various stories. They leave about six and then the show is totally in the hands of our night staff, who are responsible for guiding the show to its consummation at 11:00.

EXCAL: When did you start anchoring newscasts?

ROBERTSON: I had been anchoring newscasts at CBC since I started in television there in 1956. I did some anchoring for local shows in Winnipeg and in 1958 I went to Ottawa and I did the evening telecasts at 6:30 and 9:30. When I moved to Toronto I started anchoring the weekend national newscasts. In 1970 I took over the five night a week newscast and continued that until 1976 when I moved over to CTV.

The condition which we agreed upon at CBC in 1970 was that even though I couldn't touch any copy (the newsreaders and writers were in different unions and their duties could not overlap) they did say that on news specials I could have a hand in the writing. They [news specials] weren't under the jurisdiction of the union then so we didn't have the politics there. But as frontman of the five night a week newscast, if I wanted to write some copy of my own, I wasn't allowed. Because I had a good relationship with the people on the newsdesk, however, I was usually able to get things changed.

What bothered me most was that I felt I should have been able to write, rewrite or edit the way anybody else was able to do. It wasn't a question of taking anyone's job; it was a question of having a program that allowed that person to have some input.

EXCAL: Does the same situation still exist at the CBC?

ROBERTSON: No, I think it's changed now. Without taking all the credit for it, I will take a little. I think my move from CBC to CTV caused the CBC to make some changes which meant in effect that people who front the news are now more involved. For example, Hilary Brown [anchor of CBLT's early evening newscast] is quite involved in her evening newscast.

Basically my move helped them clear a path and deal with certain problems that arose from overlapping union jurisdictions. And it was certainly a good thing for me; it cleared all the cobwebs away. At CTV I didn't have to worry about it. You can write, you can report, you can edit . . .

EXCAL: Did CTV offer you the job or did you approach the network?

ROBERTSON: CTV approached me in the summer of 1976. I didn't jump at it at first but I looked at it very seriously as I was at the end of the road at CBC regarding conflicts between the different union jurisdictions. I was in the announcers' union and as such, I couldn't actually be an editorial person . . . You were

considered a reader, a voice, a host. And you weren't really supposed to be involved with the editorial input.

EXCAL: Do you see any differences between CBC and CTV newscasts?

ROBERTSON: In the newscast we follow pretty much the same thing. If you watch both newscasts you will see differences in approach but you'll often see the same stories. In our approach, we're a little faster, and our reports are usually shorter. That's because we try to cover a lot of ground and our approach has always been to cover the breaking news and to make sure we cover all the bases. That, I think, can be considered the main difference between

"We're not in the beginning years of television anymore, we're now in a highly sophisticated television age and people relate differently to TV now. They're not prepared to take anyone on face value; they want to know something about what that person is and what they represent."

CBC and CTV. Obviously, there are some differences like the order of the stories but basically it's pretty much the same agenda.

EXCAL: You co-anchored the news with Harvey Kirck up until a few years ago. Do you find reading the news yourself easier than reading in a two-man show?

ROBERTSON: Harvey would be the first to admit that it is easier working a one person show than a two-person show because in a two-person show you are constantly stopping to let the other person speak and it interrupts the flow of the newscast. But the two anchor format was the vogue for a long time (and CTV followed it).

It was not easy for me to do because you always had the problem of starting and stopping. You also don't develop the same relationship with the stories. You have a relationship with your own stories but you don't develop the same relationship with the whole show.

EXCAL: So how do you account for the success of your partnership?

ROBERTSON: Harvey and I genuinely like each other—I think that showed on the news. There were no ego problems; there was none of the "he read 10 minutes last night therefore I have to read 10 minutes tonight." Also we had been around for a while and I don't think we had the same prima donna responses to things. We weren't concerned with the show business aspect of it but with the news. It started as a pretty good professional relationship and it developed into a strong personal relationship. We still see each other socially. I think it's been the most successful Canadian anchoring relationship.

EXCAL: Do you have any plans about leaving the grind of the five night a week job?

ROBERTSON: No, I'm still here and I'm not tiring of it yet. I suppose we all see the day when it's time to move on to something else but one of the reasons [I haven't left] is because there is no step up. What do you do when you finish this? Harvey went on to do commentary on *W5* but the perception of the audience is that he's retired. Now of course he has to work to shed that perception . . . People perceive this to be one of the top two or three jobs (in broadcasting) in the country, and if you leave it you must be retired.

EXCAL: There have been a number of complaints levelled of television news, namely its superficiality. A newspaper, for example, covers events in much greater detail.

ROBERTSON: In comparison to a newspaper, I see a television newscast as the front page, as you're dealing with the main stories of the day. There are other programs that are designed to take you beyond the headlines of the day. In our [CTV's] case: *Canada AM*, the local newscasts, and current affairs programs like *W5*, a weekly show that deals with the issues behind the news [are such examples].

The daily newscast is there to give you the day's events—"this is what happened"—that's basically all it is and I think it does that job quite effectively . . . The people who make that charge are not considering just what daily newscasts are supposed to do.

EXCAL: Are there any changes you would like to see in television newscasts?

ROBERTSON: I suppose I'd like to see longer newscasts; I'd like to see us go to a half hour. I don't know if that's possible as there are enormous pressures from the local stations for their own newscasts . . . Overall, I think TV news is doing a better job than it has ever done. There's more instant coverage, and daily coverage of international events due to satellites. Now there is a criticism that you touched on before, that too much news is becoming 'infotainment,' sort of like what you get on *Entertainment Tonight*. That perhaps has been done in some cases and I believe CBS, up until three or four months ago, was heading in that direction and it was scary [as CBS is a major influence on TV journalism].

There's a slot for the *Entertainment Tonight* type of programming, but it's not in the daily newscast. We can have light items—and we do, as light items are part of life—but that style doesn't belong.