



By Darrel J.
Papillion

Walter Cronkite and a New Color Television Set

I will never forget when my world changed from black-and-white to color. I was about 8 years old. I came home around 5:30 in the afternoon from some school-related activity, and things were never the same. When my mind goes back to the early- to mid-1970s, everything seems to take on a green, orange or gold hue. Back then, new refrigerators and other kitchen appliances were typically gold or green, while carpets and sofas seemed to come in various shades of orange, gold, green and brown. Manufacturers used names like Harvest Gold, Rust or Avocado for these new appliance colors that replaced the plain white of the 1950s and 1960s. For those of you under 40, Google “Brady Bunch house interior” and you’ll understand what I mean.

On that afternoon, in our “autumn-toned” 1970s living room, my family’s 1960s model black-and-white television set had been replaced by a shiny, new Zenith color console. Granted, we were probably the last family in our social circle to get a color TV but, when we finally got one, my parents seemed to spare no expense. They bought the big, fancy wooden “Solid State-Space Command” console model that looked more like an armoire than a television set.

I will never forget who I first saw “in color” on our new TV. He was the most



trusted man in America in those post-Watergate days. His name was Walter Cronkite.

It’s hard to believe that, just a generation ago, almost all Americans got their news from a few basic — but highly trusted — sources. The news came mainly from local or national newspapers, several now-largely-extinct weekly news magazines, and radio and television news. We live in a very different world today. Americans get their news — real and sometimes not-so-real — from innumerable sources. The traditional press has been supplemented, and some might even say largely replaced in some quarters, by cable news, online news sources, blogs and social media. Sources of information are almost endless, and many Americans, at least those who follow the news, often seem to choose their news sources based

upon their political or social ideology.

Today, even for us — trained legal professionals who deal in facts and evidence — it is sometimes hard to separate “news” from “analysis.” Walter Cronkite once said, “I am a news presenter, a news broadcaster, an anchorman, a managing editor — not a commentator or analyst.” He said he felt “no compulsion to be a pundit.” Now, everyone seems to be a pundit. On today’s network and cable television news shows, after a few basic “facts” are “presented,” the analysts and commentators start “spinning.” As lawyers, we are keenly aware that if the story is a law-related one, within moments, so-called “network legal analysts” — usually lawyers who no longer practice, if they ever practiced, or who practice in a different jurisdiction and who generally have very few facts about the case at hand — are all-too-ready to give “expert” opinions on what a court or jury might do, often second guessing the decisions of the real lawyers and judges involved in the case. The viewing public is often confused, if not misled, by these talking heads.

When Uncle Walter, as Cronkite was sometimes called, ended his broadcast each night, as he did that particular evening on our new color television set, with his famous closing line, “And that’s the way it is,” we had a high level of confi-

dence that things really were as he had just described them. Today, we're not so sure. In those days, before "news" — both real and not-so-real — could be "shared" with a couple of clicks on social media or in a mass email, we all knew that "fake news" was limited to the "publications" on sale next to the chewing gum and candy bars in the grocery store check-out area.

Some believe basic American institutions, like the press, are in jeopardy. Maybe. Maybe not. Certainly, Cronkite and his colleagues did not always get it right, but today's news consumers must be more vigilant than a generation ago when Cronkite delivered the evening news. Indeed, some question whether other American institutions critical to our existence as an open and free society are also in jeopardy. Some contend a decline in civics education in our schools has made these challenges greater. Only 25 percent of upper elementary and secondary students are proficient in civics and government.

As Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) president, I am tremendously proud of the work the LSBA has done in the area of civics education. Every year, scores of Louisiana lawyers and judges volunteer their time or treasure to support the Louisiana Center for Law and Civic Education, an important program that promotes the teaching of legal and civics concepts in Louisiana schools. This important educational arm of the LSBA works to teach students about legal rights, responsibilities, and, perhaps most importantly, the role of a responsible citizen in our democracy. The program focuses on critical thinking and potential real-life legal situations designed to help students better understand how our system of government works and the principles on which it is based.

Walter Cronkite may be gone, but hopefully our children's educations — and our own — will help us all understand, and when necessary affect, "the way it is" in our American democracy for generations to come. For more information about how you can participate in this important project, visit online: www.lalce.org.



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