



The Man Behind The Desk: An Intimate Chat With Lester Holt

Posted on March 6th, 2017

Having first started his career as a breaking news journalist, Lester Holt spent his early years literally chasing news stories from the seat of his Ford Granada. Although his role has changed, and he now sits behind the desk at NBC's *Nightly News with Lester Holt*, some things remain the same. For Holt, it's always been about catalyzing real change through the stories he covers: "Through those early experiences, I realized the impact and power of what we do [as journalists] —we can push public policy, and we get people to think!" We sat down with Holt to dig deeper into his experiences in the field, and find out just what he's looking forward to covering the most in 2017. [Read our exclusive interview below, and be sure to tune in to NBC *Nightly News with Lester Holt* evenings on NBC.](#)

You've had such an illustrious career that's spanned over decades—besides your tenacity, what would you say has kept you pushing forward? Is your professional life guided by a personal mantra?

I think the thing that pushes any journalist forward is just this innate curiosity. I always have more questions than I can answer—and that's what pushes you. You're always like, "Well, what's behind that corner?" "What's over there?" "What do they have to say?" And that, is what really drives all of us I think. This insatiable need to know, to understand, and to tell others.

In terms of a mantra, I think I've got several of them, but the one that guides me the most: "Be better tomorrow than you were today." I'm really never quite satisfied with my performance. I'm always like, "No, I can do that better tomorrow. I can write that story in a better way. I can exercise better editorial judgment," and so that's what keeps me going.

How do you feel like the conversations around divisive issues like politics, religion, and race have changed since you first started reporting the news? Culturally we've shifted to address some of these issues more openly than in the past, but has that cultural shift impacted the media's treatment of these issues?

We've always had differences. You can't have a country this size without differences. I think the biggest change in our industry was the advent of cable news. When cable news began to promote opinionated programming, provocative programming, I think that really brought these differences to light. I think cable has found a terrific niche right now to allow those kind of conversations to go on, while on the broadcast side it's a bit more straightforward. I think that has exposed the divisions that probably were already there—that and social media. Social media has become mainstream, because to some extent we rely on it and everyone has a voice now. So I think it's our communication that has changed, but our differences have not.

We love *Investigation Discovery* and *Dateline NBC* in particular. Does it feel different to function as a narrator for a story that has a clear beginning, middle and end, whereas often news stories don't offer viewers that kind of closure?

Yeah, it's very different! On *Nightly News* we're looking at today's news. We go out, and we do interviews and based on what's just happened. A lot of times, there's no resolution because a crime has just been committed. You don't know what the trial's going to look like or the verdict. For *Dateline*, on the other hand, we can take a year or more to develop a story, and it's really all about storytelling. It does have an arch, a beginning, a middle, and an end. So, on that level I guess, it's a bit more satisfying that we can provide an answer. Obviously, when we're doing day-to-day news it's incremental. The answers will play out over months, but it's very funny you say that, because there are people who only know me from *Dateline*! I think it's got such a loyal fan base, and I say fan carefully because a lot of the stories are unfortunately kind of dark.

I always remind folks, we don't just cover crime. We've done some pretty hard-hitting things. I did a big episode on some of the violence in Chicago. We've covered asthma in impoverished communities and how it's impacting children. We try to cover a wide gamut of stories. It allows me to exercise different news muscles.

The *Inspiring America* series is really is a wonderful way to sign off, especially after reporting on some of the world's most sobering news. How did the series come to life, and how do you collaborate with reporters across the country to capture these stories?

Well, we did a series called *Making A Difference*. I think that was kind of the forerunner of it, and it was people who were making a difference in their community. But that was a little bit narrow and we thought, "Well, what are people doing that's just inspiring people?" Maybe they're not changing the world, but they're just inspiring people. Our correspondents and our producers really started getting into these stories. We'd get calls about these sorts of stories, and what's fun is the correspondents are enthusiastic about it! Everybody wants to do these stories. It's no fun doing all the heavy stuff everyday, and sometimes we all kind of need a lift. We're not immune to the effects of bad news, strife or division, so we're all looking for something different. So that's how it developed.

The whole *Nightly News* gang is involved, and it's a really collaborative effort. Everyone here has a voice to pitch ideas, to pitch stories. Everyone's ideas are treated with respect, and I love that about this group. So, I get notes all the time from producers, "Hey, I just found out about this story. Would you be interested in doing it, are you available to do it?" I did one a few weeks ago down in Philadelphia about a guy who grew up in a really tough neighborhood, and the schools have a lot of issues there. His mother had a bar, she closed the bar. Her dying wish was, "Look, do something right," and he turned the bar into an after school learning center! Not only it was neat to cover the story, but within a day or so they said they were raising money for an addition next door. I was getting notes from people, "I want to go volunteer there!"

I'm struck by how many people will mention these stories to me or they'll send notes, "Thank you very much for that story!" My staff jokes with me because sometimes I get a little teary at the end, when they're really touching ones. You'll see my eyes glaze up a little bit.

What are you most looking forward to in 2017, and are there specific stories that you're really excited to tell?

Well for 2017, I was looking forward to the political temperature being turned down. That's kind of like a New Year's resolution that's already gone. 2016 was an amazing year. It was my first full year as nightly anchor, and there was the Olympics, the primaries. I was moderator in two debates, we covered the political conventions, the election.

But you know, it hasn't slowed down—at the same time as a news junkie, yeah, it's fun. This is what we do! I'm looking forward to moving forward on other stories that maybe don't have to do as much with politics on a day-to-day basis. Obviously, it's important. But I'm always looking for new opportunities, things that we as a broadcast can focus on and issues that we can really roll up our sleeves and get into. I love to travel, and I'll go wherever the big story takes us!



[Read our exclusive interview with Holt above, and be sure to tune in to NBC *Nightly News with Lester Holt* evenings on NBC.](#)