When Naked News launched in 1999, dot-com optimism was at an all-time high. Since then, thousands of get-rich-quick web schemes have evaporated, but this strange mix of striptease and current events continues to thrive with almost no promotion. In addition to one of Toronto’s most mysterious and enduring media success stories.
yearly subscription rates of up to $14.95 and $89.70, respectively. Its website attracts up to five million unique visitors each month (the majority are American men, aged 35-55), and the Naked News mobile app has been downloaded close to a million times.

The company employs a staff of 30, which includes full-time and part-time anchors, producers, writers, editors, graphic designers, and camera operators dispersed across two floors of offices, cubicles, and two studios with elevated ceilings, in a former church. Anchors continue to be discovered through ads in local Toronto publications.

The obvious explanation for Naked News’ enduring success, says Clive Thompson, a columnist and contributing editor at Wired, is sex appeal. “Historically, men have had all sorts of sexual fantasies about the hot women covering news,” says Thompson. “In some respects, this is a straightforward plug-in to that pre-existing fetish, which is, ‘Wow, what if that really hot woman delivering the news were naked?’”

But more importantly, Thompson believes the timing of Naked News’ debut was either lucky or brilliant. “It launched like a year before everything crashed to the ground, and there was this period when totally crazy ideas were getting massive amounts of financing,” he says. “Also, they launched right around the time when Victorian ideas were getting massive amounts of financing,” he says.

Another challenge: It took Sinclair several years to come to terms with this combination of serious news and nudity, our program is most certainly not for everyone. In our program, naked is just that: naked. There’s nothing else going on, so if someone has an issue with nudity in its most basic form, I would advise them not to tune in.”

There are special challenges that come with being a Naked News anchor. For one, aging on camera. Sinclair tells me this hasn’t been especially uncomfortable for her, even with the daily nudity requirement. “I have a large and loyal fan base that is growing up with me,” Sinclair says. “If I were to quit because of an idea that only certain beauty is worth presenting, then I would end up disappointing so many who would miss me.”

Another challenge: It took Sinclair several years to come to terms with this combination of serious news and elements of burlesque. After 9/11, she took nine months off to consider her role at Naked News. “It just became very difficult after reporting that day. It was not a time to feel frivolous, for me, personally,” In 2000, she drew attention to the death of Pierre Trudeau by reporting the event fully clothed. “It was a choice. Either do it completely naked or completely dressed. That was in our early years, and probably today I would have presented it naked because it is our format, and it’s what we do.”

Finding this balance between selling sex appeal and delivering at least pseudo-pertinent news coverage will always be Naked News’ most difficult task. Of course, this is a media organization that’s not out to win Pulitzer Prizes, break major stories, or compete with CNN. Rather, it’s the only provider of a service that simultaneously delivers news and beautiful, naked women. It’s the concept that the sexuality is the draw for most (or all), but Sinclair insists that Naked News delivers much more.

“Back in the 60s, Playboy was big and men said, ‘Oh, I read it for the articles,’” she says. “It was sort of true because the man about town had to know how to mix a drink or know about the biggest political changes. We serve a lot of the same purposes. If some guy who wouldn’t normally watch the news watches our news, he can go to any party or any bar and not embarrass himself. He will be up to date on current events.”

Thompson points out that a number of porn sites fall because their content is recycled and repurposed by numerous other sites. But Naked News consistently delivers fresh, original content to its viewers. “And like all news services, people will pay for it because it’s coming in a regular stream.”

I n between takes, I speak with a topless Sinclair—formerly a brand manager in the consumer goods industry—about the coordination required to unbutton, unhook, and undress with her eyes on the teleprompter: “Taking off clothes while reading can definitely screw up a take,” she says.

On camera, she slides off a black garter while talking about the UK phone-hacking scandal. “Conspiracy to pervert the court of justice...” She removes each bra strap, drops her bra, and then takes off her panties. Just another day at work.

Later on, we speak in a dressing room about how Wilde posed for Playboy in 2010, and shortly thereafter auditioned for Naked News.

“It was just kind of an exciting opportunity,” she says. “I got to be in front of the camera and learn a lot about the news and up-to-date stories. It was a very exciting, liberating experience.”

Unlike Sinclair, Wilde’s last name is a pseudonym, but both women are open about their profession with family and friends. “I had always been shy when growing up about nudity and all that, and I thought I would never be made in front of anyone. I just had a really good support system from my family.”

Wilde’s prominent role at Naked News is the result of the positive response she’s garnered from fans, which is obviously the result of her appearance and not her journalistic credibility. Her popularity makes sense, but does the staff at Naked News actually think their brand of journalism has value?

In a 2002 Toronto Life story, then Naked News writer Phil Liberman suggested that the nudity was “a metaphor for getting down to the bare facts.”

After the broadcast, I ask Sinclair, now wearing a black dress, if she thinks this notion seriously. “Absolutely I do, and that goes back again to the fact that we don’t use a lot of video footage. If there’s a plane crash, we’re not going to show footage of it from every angle and yet another angle. We say the plane crashed, x number of people died, and move on. We don’t sensationalize and roll around and glorify these ugly details. Really, I find it obscures the facts even, so we deliver it straight up. Stripped down.”

“Well, yes. If you can somehow manage to aver your eyes from the nudity, it’s true that Naked News’ take on world events is less scandal-driven and provides fewer hyped-up jolts per minute than most newscasts. “TV news is sensationalistic, drastical, thirst-driven. “Thompson adds. “And so in one sense they’ve picked a hurdle over which it’s fairly easy to vault, and they seem to have done so.” They certainly aren’t purveyors of carnage porn, like many U.S. local broadcasts.

“Naked News is simply another evolution in infotainment,” says producer Lucas Tyler. “As for defending nudity, our program is most certainly not for everyone. In our program, naked is just that: naked. There’s nothing else going on, so if someone has an issue with nudity in its most basic form, I would advise them not to tune in.”

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