

## Lester Crystal, Guiding Force Behind 'NewsHour,' Dies at 85

As executive producer, he expanded the PBS newscast to an hour and helped make it a distinctive voice in broadcast journalism.



By Neil Genzlinger

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Lester M. Crystal, who after 20 years at NBC News, including two as its president, moved to “The MacNeil/Lehrer Report” on PBS and immediately set about transforming it from a half-hour program into “The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour,” a broadcast widely acclaimed for its breadth and depth, died on Wednesday in Manhattan. He was 85.

His son Bradley said the cause was brain cancer.

Mr. Crystal, a longtime resident of Scarsdale, N.Y., served as executive producer of “NewsHour” for 22 years, helping to establish the program as a distinctive voice in broadcast journalism. Anchored by Robert MacNeil and Jim Lehrer (who died in January at 85), “NewsHour” took an in-depth approach to the news that the half-hour news programs of commercial television largely could not.



Mr. Crystal brought “policy and political debates to life by talking to real people where they live and work,” said Judy Woodruff, the current “NewsHour” anchor. via PBS NewsHour

World leaders, presidential candidates and other newsmakers were interviewed at length as the broadcast, generally spurning spot news, examined issues in segments that had more in common with a newsmagazine than with the evening news on ABC, CBS and NBC. And though the network programs were far more widely watched, “NewsHour” gained influence, particularly in the corridors of power.

Mr. Crystal remained executive producer until 2005, when he became president of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. He retired in 2010.

Judy Woodruff, who came over from NBC to join "NewsHour" as a correspondent when the program started and is now anchor of its successor show, "PBS NewsHour," said Mr. Crystal had shaped the newscast in important ways.

"He guided us to get out and talk to the American people," she said by email, "to bring their hopes, dreams and views to every newscast, to bring policy and political debates to life by talking to real people where they live and work."

Lester Martin Crystal was born on Sept. 13, 1934, in Duluth, Minn. His father, Isadore, owned a food distribution business, and his mother, Sara (Davis) Crystal, was a homemaker.

After graduating from Duluth East High School in 1952, Mr. Crystal enrolled at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. He earned a bachelor's degree there in 1956 and a master's degree in 1957.

He started his career that same year as a news writer for KDAL radio and television in Duluth. He joined NBC in 1963, producing the nightly news program of its Chicago affiliate as well as the documentary series "Dateline Chicago." In 1965 he became regional manager in Chicago for "The Huntley-Brinkley Report," the network's nightly news program, and in 1967 he moved east to become its news editor in New York. He advanced to associate producer and then, in 1968, to producer.

Mr. Crystal was among the journalists who traveled to China when President Richard M. Nixon made his historic trip there in 1972. He became executive producer of "NBC Nightly News" and rose to executive vice president of the network's news division before being named NBC News president in October 1977.



Mr. Crystal was among the journalists who traveled to China when President Richard M. Nixon made his historic trip there in 1972. via Crystal family

Perhaps the most wrenching moment in his two years as president was the murder of two NBC journalists, Don Harris, a correspondent, and Bob Brown, a cameraman, as they tried to leave after an investigative trip to the Jonestown cult in Guyana in November 1978. The mass suicide at the cult followed hours later.

"The most meaningful memorial we can give to them," Mr. Crystal said of the two newsmen, "is to report the news with the determination and dedication they demonstrated in their careers."

Mr. Crystal remained president until 1979, when, after being unable to dent the popularity of the "CBS Evening News," which had Walter Cronkite in the anchor chair, he was replaced by William J. Small and given the job of senior executive producer of politics and special news programs. (Mr. Small died in May at 93.)

Once he moved to PBS, Mr. Crystal's "NewsHour" faced a test almost immediately: Mr. Lehrer had a heart attack three months after the show was launched, leaving Mr. MacNeil (known as Robin) in need of another partner for several months.

“The new kid on the block, I suddenly became the Washington-based co-anchor along with Robin MacNeil in New York,” Ms. Woodruff recalled. “Even with Robin’s enormous talent, I don’t think there was any way we could have kept the program going in Jim’s absence without Les Crystal’s direction.”

In 1984, as the hourlong version of “MacNeil/Lehrer” reached its one-year anniversary, Mr. Crystal viewed the experiment as showing signs of success.

“Many people tune in to us for the second half-hour,” he said in a 1984 interview with The Christian Science Monitor, acknowledging that those viewers were using his broadcast to supplement the half-hour network news. “But those who watch us from the start have begun to understand that they will be getting all the major news. The most significant difference is that we take major stories and spend as much time on them as is called for — sometimes as much as 20 minutes.”

In 1994, when the O.J. Simpson murder investigation consumed the commercial networks’ newscasts for weeks on end, “NewsHour” didn’t take the bait, sticking with its issues-oriented segments and generally mentioning the Simpson case only briefly.

“This is a program that deals with crime as a problem, not as a staple,” Mr. Crystal told Howard Rosenberg, television critic for The Los Angeles Times.

Mr. Rosenberg had some fun with the noncoverage.

“Memo to Judge Lance Ito, who has ordered potential Simpson jurors to avoid all media,” he wrote. “‘NewsHour’ is safe, as close to being Simpson-free as TV news gets.”

Mr. Crystal married Toby Lee Wilson in 1958. In addition to his son Bradley, he is survived by his wife; two other children, Alan and Elizabeth Crystal; three grandchildren; and a sister, Elaine Hallfin. Another sister, Dinah Kossoff, died before him.

Ms. Woodruff recalled Mr. Crystal’s steadying presence at broadcast time.

Mr. Crystal on the job with “NewsHour” in 1997. via PBS NewsHour

“Les’s voice was the one you wanted to break into your ear during a news-making interview or on an election night,” she said, “providing a crucial fact or giving you the breaking news you needed to get on the air right away: authoritative, calm and brief. He was a stickler for facts; you were OK if Les said it.”