

'60 Minutes' And Its Icon Plan for Shift In Generations

By JIM RUTENBERG

Mike Wallace, who turns 84 in May, says that next fall he will severely reduce his involvement with "60 Minutes," the CBS news magazine that he helped start in 1968.

Mr. Wallace, the oldest full-time news correspondent in network television, said he would cut his workload in half.

"The time has come," Mr. Wallace said last week at his office, which overlooks the Hudson River and is lined with photographs of world leaders and other television icons.

The withdrawal of Mr. Wallace, the face of the program since it began, effectively begins a slow and deliberate change of leadership at "60 Minutes" — the first in its 34-year history.

His scaling back comes as CBS News executives are beginning to focus on how to maintain the program as key players inch closer to retirement. The commentator Andy Rooney is 83; the correspondent Morley Safer is 70; and the creator and executive producer, Don Hewitt, is 79.

The program has undergone some wear and tear in recent years. Once an untouchable island within CBS News, late last year it faced production staff cutbacks for the first time in memory. Its viewers, on average in their mid- to late 50's, are older than the audience today's advertisers generally desire. Its record run of 23 years as one of TV's top-10 rated programs came to an end last year.

Still, "60 Minutes" is the top-rated news magazine on television — ranked 16th among all network programs on the Nielsen Media Research ratings list this season with an average audience of 15 million people. It is considered by many in its industry to be the highest-quality news magazine in all TV news. And it remains not only a vital revenue generator for CBS, a unit of Viacom, but also an important promotional platform for the network's other programs — one CBS hopes to have for years to come.

Andrew Heyward, the president of CBS News, said the sister program of "60 Minutes," "60 Minutes II" — which was started in 1999 initially against Mr. Hewitt's wishes — could figure heavily in the future of "60 Minutes."

"That is a place where we are developing people who can potentially move over," he said. Jeffrey Fager, the "60 Minutes II" executive producer, is widely expected to take over for Mr. Hewitt, when the time comes.

Mr. Hewitt said that one person he might

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For '60 Minutes' and Mike Wallace, Time Has Come to Ponder a Shift in Generations

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rely on to pick up the slack for Mr. Wallace is Bob Simon, the "60 Minutes II" correspondent who occasionally appears in segments for "60 Minutes." (He also mentioned Christiane Amanpour, the CNN war correspondent who contributes to "60 Minutes.")

For his part, Mr. Hewitt said that he did not foresee leaving the program soon. "I'm going to be 80, and I don't think I've missed a step," he said. "My aim is to die at my desk — I don't want to die anywhere else."

The "60 Minutes" correspondents Steve Kroft, 56, Leslie Stahl, 60, and Ed Bradley, 60, are relative youngsters, he said, and do not seem to be preparing an exit, either.

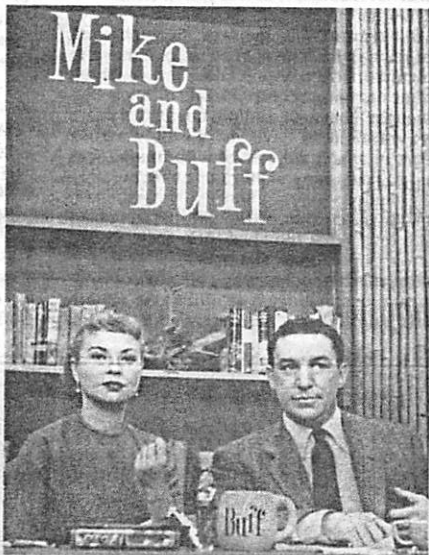
Mr. Hewitt said that he was aware that Mr. Wallace's diminished role could hurt the program, as he is the most identifiable of its correspondents. "He was the logo," Mr. Hewitt said. "What do you do? You look around."

Some on the "60 Minutes" staff doubt that Mr. Wallace will go through with his plan to cut back. He previously vowed to slow down and then went ahead and outproduced his colleagues while they worried about the strain on him.

"I think he should cut back, and I'm glad to see that he's going to take it a little easier," Mr. Kroft said. "But if he feels next year that he's not doing enough, or somebody else has had better stories than he's had, he may steal everybody's producers and do 20."

But Mr. Wallace says that he means what he says.

In an article in The New York Times last month about aging and career, Mr. Wallace was quoted as



Associated Press

Mike Wallace, soon to be 84, was the host of several shows before "60 Minutes" started. One show, in the early 50's, was with his wife at the time, Buff Cobb. In 1968, working for CBS News, he was removed from the floor of the Democratic National Convention.



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

'60 Minutes II' could serve as a source of new talent.

saying, "I'm frustrated because I'm of a certain age, and I want to keep working, and you can say, 'If you don't have the psychic energy and you don't do it the way you used to do, why not leave?'"

Mr. Wallace appears robust and maintains a sprightly gait. But he said last week that he was fatigued by the travel his job demanded. "The traveling has become a pain in the

back, it really has," he said.

All the same, Mr. Wallace is still the show's most productive correspondent. He has been in 15 segments so far this year, including one about Yasir Arafat — reported in Ramallah — and another for which he flew to Kuwait. John Nash, the Nobel laureate in economic science whose battle with schizophrenia was the subject of the film "A Beautiful Mind," appeared with Mr. Wallace on "60 Minutes" to tell his story and deny rumors that he was an anti-Semite, among other things.

People at CBS News say that Mr. Wallace has continued to work so hard despite often being advised to slow down. "We've urged him to pace himself," Mr. Heyward said.

He has never tended to do so. Mr. Wallace's career spans the history of television. He started in radio in 1939 as a news reader and a narrator for programs like "The Green Hornet." He moved to television as an interviewer and an actor in the 1950's. He played a homicide detective on the ABC murder mystery program "Stand by for Crime" and was the host of "The Big Surprise," a game show on NBC.

He began to make his name as a pugnacious — some said sensationalistic — interviewer on "Night Beat," a program shown on Channel 5 in New York City, and "The Mike Wallace Interview" on ABC — famously roasting and clashing with news figures like the labor leader Michael J. Quill or celebrities like Barbra Strei-

sand.

People inside and outside CBS have speculated that Mr. Wallace has continued to work so hard to remove the tarnish that he believes a 1995 report about the tobacco industry caused to his career. Amid fear of a big lawsuit, CBS lawyers initially balked at showing a "60 Minutes" report on Brown & Williamson Tobacco.

Mr. Wallace and Mr. Hewitt were criticized by some at CBS for initially giving in too easily to the network's lawyers — a version of events that was used in the movie "The Insider." The movie deeply angered the men, who described it as a distortion.

But colleagues and friends say

that Mr. Wallace has continued to work so hard not only because he is very competitive, but also because he has never quite felt accepted by journalism's establishment.

"He's still looking for the story that will define his career — as if he hasn't already done several hundred of them," Mr. Kroft said. "I think that because he's had so many aspects to his career, he thinks some people still don't take him seriously as a journalist."

Mr. Wallace said that he simply enjoyed nothing more than the pursuit of a good news story and the perch from which he gets to tell it.

He added that he was not entirely going away, anyway. "Let's not kill Mike," he said. "I'm not dying."