

# Out for the count

Not voting helps Charlie Gibson with quest to be fair.  
Fred Friendly would approve.

BY JANET WALDMAN



Charlie Gibson is waist deep in politics most days, reporting on the presidential candidates so Americans can make a decision in the voting booth this fall. He'll do no such thing, however. The anchor of ABC's *World News with Charles Gibson* does not vote. This keeps him from leaning toward one candidate, which could affect the way he reports the news.

Seated behind the desk in his West 57th Street office off the ABC newsroom, which was functioning at a low hum around noon on a recent Monday, Gibson pursed his lips as he recalled what prompted his decision to be intentionally indecisive.

"When I covered the 1976 presidential race, I found myself caring whether Gerald Ford won or lost," he said. Gibson also took a cue from the late broadcast journalist, David Brinkley. "He used to say, 'There is no such thing as objectivity, but we should strive for a lesser degree of subjectivity.'"

Nodding toward the newsroom, he said, "I don't know the politics of anybody out there—we don't discuss it." Gibson admits feeling a bit guilty about not voting, and his family adds to the guilt, but he'll wait until retirement to cast a ballot.

Ruth Friendly is not surprised by Gibson's quest for impartiality. The widow of legendary producer Fred Friendly joined President John L. Lahey in June to present Gibson with the Fred Friendly First Amendment Award at the 15th annual luncheon in New York City hosted by Quinnipiac's School of Communications. They also presented the Fred Friendly Lifetime Achievement Award to First Amendment lawyer Floyd Abrams.

The awards honor those who have shown courage and forthrightness in preserving the rights afforded by the First Amendment. They are named for Friendly in recognition of his commitment to quality broadcast journalism as former president of CBS News and collaborator with broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow.

Gibson and Brinkley were the types of newsmen Fred Friendly admired. "Fred would say Charlie is even-handed, and Fred wanted journalists to be fair," said Ruth Friendly. She described Gibson as smart, but easygoing, with a disarming manner. "He's able to ask the right questions and pursue until he gets an answer."

Gibson's 40 years of experience has afforded him an eyewitness view of history in the making and a perspective on the world shared by a select few. Prior to being named anchor of *World News*, Gibson co-anchored *Good Morning America* from 1987-98 and returned to *GMA* to re-launch the broadcast with Diane Sawyer in 1999. He also was co-anchor of *Primetime Thursday*.

This past March marked the 10th anniversary of Fred Friendly's death. He and Murrow are remembered for many influential documentaries including the broadcasts that have been widely credited with breaking Sen. Joseph McCarthy's grip on the country as he waged his anti-Communist campaign and *Harvest of Shame*, an exposé on the hardships of migrant workers. Is the quality journalism he strove to achieve and are the values he held dear still alive today?

"The trouble is, those values were fading before Fred left us," Ruth said, noting that more and more people get their news in quick hits from the Internet rather than sitting down to watch a nightly program. "There are so many choices for getting information, from the *Nightly News with Brian Williams*, the *NewsHour with Jim Lebrer* and *Anderson Cooper 360* to *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, a host of talk shows, and

don't forget the blogs. Young people think they are getting the news when they watch the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart*," she said.

Fred Friendly resigned from CBS News in the '60s because it chose to broadcast sitcom reruns instead of airing live Senate hearings about the Vietnam War, putting profit over the public trust. "But now there's CNN and C-SPAN and other all-news channels, so the things he fought for and was passionate about, we have," she said.

Luncheon guests watched a documentary about Friendly's impact on journalism. Terry Martin, a senior producer, executive producer and story editor for 34 years at *60 Minutes*, created the video. Martin is also an adjunct professor of journalism at Quinnipiac and was Friendly's teaching assistant at Columbia University, where Friendly began the public television program that became the Fred Friendly Seminars in 1984 as an outgrowth of the media and society seminars he directed from Columbia.

In Martin's documentary, Stuart Sucherman, Friendly's colleague who worked on the seminars with him both at Columbia and the Ford Foundation, opined that Friendly would be quite alarmed at the state of broadcast journalism today. He asks, who is the Fred Friendly of our time?

"Fred was all about accuracy and fairness, and getting people to think. The business has changed considerably," Martin said. "We wanted to do this piece so journalism students at Quinnipiac would know who Fred Friendly was."

## ABRAMS HONORED

Legendary First Amendment lawyer Floyd Abrams, who during his career frequently argued before the U.S. Supreme Court to protect free speech in America, received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Fred Friendly luncheon on June 10.



Abrams and Friendly were good friends, drawn together by their dedication to the First Amendment. "He was the expert Fred consulted when it came to wrestling with constitutional and First Amendment issues," Ruth Friendly recalled.

Abrams is a partner with Cahill Gordon & Reindel LLP in New York City and the William J. Brennan Jr. Visiting Professor of First Amendment Issues at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan called Abrams "the most significant First Amendment lawyer of our age."

He made his mark early in his career as co-counsel for *The New York Times*, successfully defending in the landmark Pentagon Papers case in 1971. Abrams' high-profile clients have included ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, NPR, *Business Week* and *The Nation*. Several of Abrams' most influential cases appear in his book, *Speaking Freely: Trials of the First Amendment*.

Abrams earned a BA from Cornell University and a JD from Yale Law School. He and his wife, Efrat, have two children: Ronnie, special counsel at Davis, Polk & Wardwell, and Dan, host of MSNBC's *Verdict with Dan Abrams*.



**Fred Friendly (top photo)...**



**...with newsman Edward R. Murrow**



**...with politicians Newt Gingrich, left,  
and Rudy Giuliani**

**M**artin said Fred loved to debate issues on which reasonable people would disagree, and really enjoyed talking to those who disagreed with him. One such person was Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. Despite disagreeing on many issues, they shared common ground on the First Amendment and how to debate public policy by focusing on issues and ideas, according to Ruth.

Gibson said Fred railed against commercial pressure on the news divisions. The reality is different today than when TV news was allowed to be a loss leader, Gibson said.

“We are no longer in that era. Networks are owned by large conglomerates—ABC by Disney—and news is a pimple on the butt of the overall network, but we are expected to be profitable and we compete with entertainment now. In Fred’s time there were fewer pressures, only three outlets, but the cable stations give us some license because we know they are doing and showing things in their entirety, like the Gonzalez hearings on the legality of terrorist prisoners,” Gibson said.

He noted that minute-to-minute ratings of his program show politics engages viewers much more than world news; he cited the Obama-Clinton race vs. people dying in Myanmar as an example. “If you pay too much attention to ratings, you’ve lost the ballgame,” he said. *World News* ran neck-to-neck with NBC *Nightly News* last year, ultimately finishing with more viewers. “We won last year, and now that’s inside our heads—that’s the curse of being ahead, but I feel that if we give you a good sense of what made news today, then we’ve done our job.”

What constitutes news today, particularly local news, is explored in an award-winning documentary created this year by Karin Schwanbeck, assistant professor of journalism at Quinnipiac. In it, veteran broadcast reporters say crime and accidents often lead local newscasts while news about government and education take a backseat, because coverage is easy, cheap, and “feeds the beast.”

“Our students are used to seeing flash-and-trash, crime-and-grime, and may aspire to it. Today, reporters are better educated and trained than ever before, yet the types of stories they cover and the number of stories they turn out every day do not always allow them to make full use of their education and training,” Schwanbeck said.

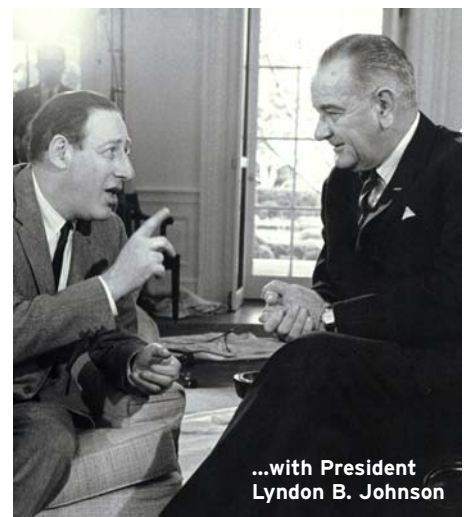
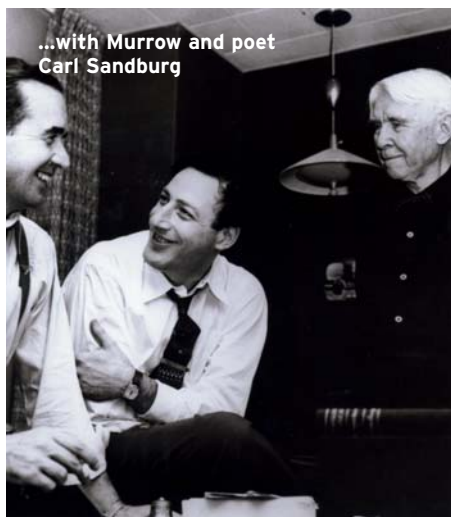
## IT'S AN HONOR



**Q**uinnipiac President John L. Lahey and Ruth Friendly greet Charlie Gibson at the Metropolitan Club in New York City, where Gibson received the 15th annual Fred Friendly First Amendment Award in June.

Attendees included Andy Rooney of *60 Minutes*; Dan Abrams, host of MSNBC’s *Verdict with Dan Abrams* (and the son of Floyd Abrams, who received a Lifetime Achievement Award that day); Alina Cho and Gregory Hunter (CNN), Geraldo Rivera (Fox News), Deborah Norville (*Inside Edition*), Susan Filan JD '91 (MSNBC), Betsy Stark and David Muir (both ABC), and David Westin, president, ABC News. For more on that event, visit [www.quinnipiac.edu/x4094.xml](http://www.quinnipiac.edu/x4094.xml).

She sends her students off-campus to find stories and expose themselves to folks who are struggling to survive. “I tell them everyone has a heart and a soul, whether they are homeless or indigent...life is not just about shopping and Facebook,” she said.



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