Today, when I am nearing the end of our two-hour block of news on a weekday evening, I remember 1964 when our 6 o’clock news was only half an hour.

In the 60’s, television news was young....and it was considered more of a public service than profit generator.

Now television newscasts are the economic engines of television stations. And as the moneymaking potential of television news has grown....so has the amount of time we devote to it and the capital we pour into it.

News is still a public service. But it is also big business. And as big business....television news operations in Atlanta are in constant, intense competition for viewers.

Over the 41 years of my career I have always been proud of the television news viewers. They reject gimmicks, happy talk, hype, and other misguided strategies to build ratings. It’s been my experience that viewers embrace good, responsible journalism.

And although the delivery methods and technology have changed dramatically over the years....the imperative of good, solid, responsible, community-oriented reporting has never changed....and I hope never will.

But the challenge of getting and keeping viewers is also with us daily. In the 60’s, viewers had at the most three choices for their news once or twice a day. Now there is news 24-7 from an almost infinite variety of sources...cable, satellite, the Internet.

The network newscasts have seen erosion in their audiences because of this...and local stations are affected as well. It’s a brave new world that we must find ways to deal with.

We are faced with a public that has so much at its fingertips. A public that has come to expect visual and auditory stimulation—a public that increasingly does not read newspapers or much of anything else--a public that seems to have a decreasing interest in public affairs, the mechanics of government, the political process, and other issues that require some intellectual engagement.

Aaron Brown, a fine seasoned journalist who recently lost his job at CNN so a younger, hipper anchor could take over, called television a perfect democracy because the audience could cast an immediate vote with the remote control. The moment you begin to bore....the moment you begin to challenge...the moment you deal with complexity....then many in that audience will vote. Vote with the remote. Vote by switching to something else.
So the overriding challenge we face as television journalists is to find ways to engage that fickle audience while still maintaining our commitment to news as a public service.

I’m not sure we’re doing very well.

We have a 24 hour news cycle. The cable channels must fill that cycle, and in recent years, with more and more cable news operations, more and more competition, a greater demand for higher ratings, we have increasingly seen a media that frankly pander to a public that is obsessed with the superficial. Think of the stories that have dominated the cable channels over the past years--the Lacy Peterson saga, the missing teen in Aruba, the Jon Benet Ramsey murder, and the most absurd manifestation: The Runaway Bride. They are all stories that are certainly worthy of some news coverage, but they are also stories that have been blown out of all proportion by constant, unending, exhaustive, titillating, sensational round-the-clock coverage by a host of media.

And if the cable channels are providing saturation coverage, so too will the networks and other media outlets, because the very coverage of these essentially tabloid stories creates an appetite for more coverage.....and woe be to the news organization that has the courage to put these stories in their proper perspective. They will pay the price when the audience votes with their remotes.

Bill Moyers has said that journalists operate with “a deep ethical imperative of which the public is aware only when we violate it.”

That deep ethical imperative is to seek the elusive truth, to expose wrongdoing, to examine issues from all sides, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and in the whole process to be fair.

So the challenge for us as journalists is to cover the news we feel is important for the public to know. Not as elitists who think we know better than the general public...but as professionals who use our experience, our skills, our knowledge to inform the public...always trying to operate under that deep ethical imperative that is very important to us.

If a journalist does his or her job....challenges conventional wisdom, questions authority, looks under rocks for hidden information, refuses to take “no comment” for an answer, searches for the truth and lets the chips fall where they may.....that journalist isn’t going to win popularity contests.

But if the job is done responsibly, with a goal of serving the public with the truth....then the public will be well served.

Since the days of our country’s birth the news media have been under attack from critics...and in many ways the attacks 200 years ago were much more severe than they are
today. But we have prospered as a free society--and our news media is a vital part of that freedom we all enjoy.

By taking the more difficult course we may not win any popularity contests, we may become even bigger targets for our critics.....but that may be the price that has to be paid if we are to fulfill our responsibility to you the people.

My appeal to the station executives who are here tonight: Try to take a long view of the responsibility your station has to serve the public. Try to resist the enormous pressures to pander to a public that craves the superficial for short term ratings--and focus more on the mission to inform, educate, illuminate, probe, investigate and expose--public services, which if done responsibly and well, will bring you the audience we all seek. An audience that appreciates and respects the role we play--and the service we provide.

And for the aspiring young journalists who are here tonight: Never lose sight of the mission to serve the public. The role you will play is a vital one for our society.

It is not an easy path, but for those who choose it--for those who love it as I do--the rewards can be great. Not necessarily material rewards--but the rewards that come from doing a vital job and doing it well. We welcome you to the arena.