



JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM

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. Inside one of Toronto's most mysterious (and enduring) media success stories.

By Stephen Baldwin

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I'm sitting in an inconspicuous TV studio on Toronto's east side, a few feet to the right of Victoria Sinclair as she reads the news from a teleprompter.

"In Montreal, a class-action lawsuit could cost Canadian tobacco companies billions..."

She delicately unhooks her black-laced bra from the front to reveal her breasts, then moves on to the weather.

"The east coast of North America has been enjoying an incredibly mild winter..."

She traces her index fingers from the front of her panties around the back and slides them off. By the end of her report, all that's left is a pair of thigh-high black stockings with little pink bows on the front. Sinclair, 46, has been doing this for almost 13 years.

Naked News' lead anchor since it debuted in December 1999, Sinclair exudes middle-aged sex appeal: part Amanda Lang, part desperate housewife. Her delivery is as smooth as that of most professional news anchors. While subtly unbuttoning and unhooking, her eyes remain locked firmly on the camera.

Naked News, the "program with nothing to hide," was conceived in early 1999 by web entrepreneurs Fernando Pereira and Kirby Stasyna. The pair doesn't give interviews, but the myth behind the show's creation, according to Sinclair, goes like this: The two friends were watching the news together when one said something along the lines of, "I wonder what that anchor looks like naked." To which the other replied with something like, "Hey, that's a great idea!"

The business was launched at the peak of dot-com optimism, when new porn sites were appearing every day. It delivered a slightly bizarre twist on porn for the horny web consumer—some current events mixed in with a casual striptease.

"I knew immediately it was going to be huge," says Sinclair. "It just seemed like a very fun thing to do. We were only airing for maybe seven to eight months before it jumped from around 10,000 viewers to 250,000 viewers overnight, and it was like, 'Oh, goodness, people are watching!'"

The show gained more local prominence in the early 2000s, when it was featured late at night on Citytv. When the dot-com bubble burst, thousands of web start-ups disappeared into thin air. But somehow, NakedNews.com has not only survived but thrived. It's a concept that began as an online oddity and turned into a viable media business with paid subscribers all over the planet.

What the Naked News audience sees hasn't changed much since 1999. The show's daily offering is an ad-free, 22-minute blend of Znaimerera CityNews and *Entertainment Tonight*, with stories that focus primarily on international politics, entertainment, technology, food, and travel. The show offers everything and nothing more than its name suggests; it's divided between Sinclair's news reads and feature reports delivered by her co-anchors. There are also out-of-studio interviews and, during the summer, a "Naked in the Streets" segment, in which topless anchors roam local sidewalks and interview unsuspecting Torontonians (a programming idea that could only exist due to the city's Topfree Equality laws).

The show is filmed five days a week, from the morning to early afternoon, then edited and posted online for Naked News members to watch whenever they please.

There are few traces of sexual innuendo in the news-readers' delivery, but the conversational, flirtatious tone and mildly salacious content are clearly directed toward a male audience. (There used to be nude male anchors as well, but that experiment ended in 2007.)

It's a formula that's working. Without much publicity, local visibility (their studio location is confidential), or any substantial marketing strategy other than a Facebook page and a Twitter account, Naked News continues to chug along under the mainstream-media radar.

Though it's no longer seen on Citytv, the show has online members in 172 countries who pay monthly and



"Our producer usually makes decisions on the theme of the show, so he'll say, 'I want everybody in a dress' or wearing over-the-top lingerie. He knows what all the scripts are going to be, so he might say, 'It's a bit of a lighter news day, it's okay for us to wear something a little more fun.' Or, 'This is a really sombre, horrible day, everybody's wearing a suit.' We'll decide which dress but he decides on the theme."

"Everybody has a bad thigh day, or face day, sometimes on top of a bad hair day. You have to suck it up. Sometimes physically. Everyone has those days. You have to slap a huge smile on it. So much of your smile and attitude go a long way. Look at the spark in your face or your personality! We're always so tough on ourselves. Attitude goes a long way."

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 broadband started to take off, and people were able to view video easily over the web. Two years earlier, and this never would have worked."

But the real secret to Naked News' endurance, he says, might actually be the surprisingly high level of its reportage. "If you look past the obvious stuff like there being an audience for this sort of cheesecake nudity, you realize after watching a segment that they actually do a pretty good job of reporting the news," Thompson says. "I think if they were joking, it may not have survived as long, but there's this actual aspect of being informed while watching."

Thompson points out that a number of porn sites fail 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."

In 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.

The studio door opens and in walks 25-year-old Rachelle Wilde. She is tall and tanned with long brown hair, and wears a silky acid-green robe that matches a set of emerald eyes.

"Twenty-five Palestinians dead, 35 Israelis injured. That's so sad," she says, reading through her lines. "Is it miss-ill or miss-aisle?"

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 nude 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 Liberbaum 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 takes 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 avert 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, dreadful, and idiotic," 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 entertainment," 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."

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 and 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 no secret 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."