Couric Rebounds With Web and Palin

By JACQUES STEINBERG  
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Katie Couric has been the most watched, most talked-about network news anchor this election season. Just not necessarily on CBS.

Consider that the three most popular YouTube videos of her interviews with Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska, the Republican vice-presidential nominee, have been seen nearly six million times over the last two weeks, far more than similar interviews with Ms. Palin by others.

And while YouTube views do not bring in the kind of advertising dollars CBS expects from a newscast, the network has corralled a big-name sponsor, Intel, for the occasional nighttime political Webcast that Ms. Couric has started on cbsnews.com. It was originally a video post-mortem introduced during the Democratic and Republican conventions and has since continued with the presidential debates.

In an interview this week in her CBS News office, Ms. Couric spoke of the satisfaction she has found in the fresh set of metrics that of late have collectively served as a reminder that she and her program still matter.

And though advertisers and rivals noted that her interviews with Ms. Palin did not budge the “CBS Evening News” out of third place in the nightly news ratings — the program’s standing should also be noted, for nearly two decades before her arrival — the segments helped her reassert her role as an anchor. They ended up serving as a virtual reintroduction of Ms. Couric, following the criticism that was heaped on her in the early months of her tenure at CBS.

“It’s nice to have people acknowledge you have a skill set,”
she said, laughing, though not necessarily easily. “There was a period of time when I was being assaulted from all sides. I never obviously intended to show it, but maybe I didn’t have as much confidence on the air.”

After years of speculation about whether young (or even middle-aged) viewers will ever again turn on a dinnertime network newscast, Ms. Couric and her producers appear to have made an end run around the network itself. By getting their best programming (or at least excerpts of it) online, they may have seized on a template for the not-so-distant future, tapping into the Web as a neon road sign directing traffic to their network broadcasts and perhaps, eventually, as a destination in itself.

In the spring CBS acknowledged that Ms. Couric and several network executives had discussed the possibility of her ending her tenure on the evening news before her contract expired in 2011, and perhaps as soon as early next year.

Asked if the coverage of the last few weeks in particular had provided her with a new blueprint of what the broadcast could be in the early months of a new presidential administration, Ms. Couric said such questions were premature.

“I haven’t really been able to look beyond Nov. 4, in terms of how things are going to shake out,” she said. “It’s very exciting living in the moment right now.”

In part Ms. Couric and her team at the “CBS Evening News” — including Rick Kaplan, the program’s executive producer, who began his career as a producer for Walter Cronkite — have benefited this fall from events outside their control. The presidential campaign of Senator John McCain, the Republican nominee, has done little to hide its frustration with some of the outspoken commentary against it on MSNBC (and, by association, NBC News as a whole) and CNN; neither has been granted an interview with Ms. Palin so far.

And yet Ms. Couric and Mr. Kaplan have done much to make their own luck. For months they have been giving over an increasing portion of the “CBS Evening News” to political coverage. Early on the program introduced a standing feature, “Primary Questions,” in which all of the major candidates for the Democratic and Republican nomination were asked the same 10 questions about character, including the last time they had been angry about something or whether trust in a marriage should be a barometer of trust in office.

“When we asked that of certain candidates, they went white,” Mr. Kaplan said.

The segments, which ran as long as eight minutes, an eternity in a broadcast that lasts 22 minutes without commercials, have since morphed into the recurring segments “Presidential Questions” and “Vice-Presidential Questions.”

Those features also served to introduce many of the show’s producers to the senior advisers of the various campaigns. In the case of the McCain campaign, those contacts were further solidified in July when Ms. Couric and Mr. Kaplan sought to provide a counterbalance to an interview she did in Jordan with Senator Barack Obama, his first with a network anchor during a highly publicized international tour. By satellite from the Middle East, Ms. Couric conducted a separate interview with Mr. McCain that was then shown on the same broadcast.

It was a gesture the McCain campaign would remember, Mr. Kaplan said.

Once Mr. McCain tapped Ms. Palin as his vice-presidential nominee, Ms. Couric said, she began working her contacts furiously, including making phone calls and sending e-mail messages to Nicolle Wallace, a former CBS political analyst who is now a top

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adviser to the McCain campaign.

Her interviews with Ms. Palin ultimately served as a reminder not only to her viewers but also to her bosses of what helped make her such a star when she was on NBC’s “Today.”

“For a while I was told really not to do any interviews on the show, which is of course what I love to do,” she said, suggesting that the network feared taking precious time from the news of the day. “That wasn’t, in my mind, using me to my full advantage.”

It also restored her somewhat as a cultural figure. Ms. Couric said she was able to laugh at the recent “Saturday Night Live” sketch in which Amy Poehler played her and Tina Fey played Ms. Palin. Though Ms. Palin got the worst of it — in Ms. Fey’s hands she referred to the Museum of Natural History as “that goofy evolution museum” and Bono as “the king of Ireland” — Ms. Couric was depicted as blinking like a windshield wiper on a stormy night.

Ms. Couric said she had later called her mother to ask, “Do I really blink that much on TV?” Her mother’s reply: “Only when you’re tired.”

A few months ago Ms. Couric created her own YouTube channel, which includes outtakes of interviews and lighter fare.

Following the vice-presidential debate, she filmed a late-night outing to a custard shop in St. Louis. Trailing by a hand-held camera, a giddy Ms. Couric can be overheard talking to a counter clerk as if she were a world leader: “I’m going over here to do an exclusive one-on-one interview with Nancy.”

Ms. Couric’s principal rivals have Web portals of their own, too, with Brian Williams of “NBC Nightly News” posting video and commentary to “The Daily Nightly” on msnbc.com and Charles Gibson’s broadcast mounting a midafternoon Web cast at abc.com. But for viewers seeking a reminder of what Ms. Couric was like at her best on “Today,” her postdebate Webcasts show her unconfined by the time and other constraints of a nightly newscast. (She can be heard occasionally singing the Intel chimes — ba-BUM-ba-BUM — when not lingering over queries to colleagues or a panel of undecided voters.)

When Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, greeted Ms. Couric via satellite on her Webcast on Tuesday by saying, “Good morning, Katie,” Ms. Couric reminded him with a laugh that it was not quite 11:30 p.m., and she was no longer on “Today.”

“You’re used to saying that to me in the good old days,” she said.