

Good News for Good News: Excellent Television Journalism Benefits Networks and our Society

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Newton Minow told broadcasters in 1961 that more news and public affairs programming would help erase the vast wasteland of television.¹ He was wrong. Forty years later, a television viewer can watch what is labeled as “news” all day, yet the wasteland has not disappeared. It may be greener, but it is no rainforest.

Let us suppose someone today took Minow’s challenge to watch TV from sign-on to sign-off—or dawn to midnight—and choose to watch only news. His day could start with the networks’ morning shows, where an interview by a cable-TV celebrity with a model is allotted twice as much time as a news roundup, and where pictures of a dog catching a man at the end of a police chase get more attention than video from a suicide bombing in Israel.

In disgust, our viewer could switch to a cable news channel to get the headlines of the important news of the day. He might see a candidate debate or a presidential news conference. But he also would be subjected to talking heads shouting at each other, their value more entertainment than public affairs. Chances are high he would encounter live coverage of a

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1. Newton N. Minow, *Television and the Public Interest*, Speech Before the National Association of Broadcasters (May 9, 1961).

tragic event in a distant city—a child abduction, a shark attack—and the coverage would be so wall-to-wall he would be tempted to think this happened everyday, everywhere.

In the evening, he could turn to a network primetime news magazine in hopes of seeing a story with the potential to change government or industry for the better. More likely, he would see a celebrity profile.

Or, wanting to find out what was happening in his community, he could turn to a local news program—and be treated to a full report from the day's police blotter, followed by a riveting story about stay-at-home dads.

It does not have to be this way. On September 11, 2001, we were all reminded of what television journalism is capable of doing. Confronted with the biggest story in a generation, the networks, the cable news channels, and local stations shined. They told an important story well. They were indispensable.

One year later, on the anniversary of the terrorist attacks, they again surpassed the highest standards. They again provided a place where the nation could come together, this time in mourning and remembrance.

It should not take a disaster for journalism to seek a higher level of quality. The viewer who watches twenty-four hours of news programming can find oases of excellence that vividly demonstrate the medium's possibilities. *Nightline*, having reinvented itself several times, consistently provides depth and context for the day's news. *60 Minutes*, while getting long in the tooth, continues to set the standard for the many imitators that have followed.

The best local stations give their viewers a wide variety of enterprise and tell stories that make a difference. Many of them hosted debates during the 2002 election campaigns and broadcast "truth tests" of campaign advertising. Local stations have done powerful investigations of corruption in the Salt Lake City Olympics, or the forced sterilization of the mentally retarded in Michigan. A Houston television station broke the story about exploding Firestone tires on Ford Explorers. Among my colleagues in the Society of Professional Journalists are television journalists who lead make-a-difference investigative teams, report documentaries, and produce a College Bowl-type high school quiz show that is broadcast on commercial TV.

If more television stations were doing this sort of work, the coverage of September 11, 2001, would not have seemed so extraordinarily exemplary. People would understand the world around them more fully, and they would be better equipped for self-government.

But too many local stations and network news magazines hew to a philosophy that Minow criticized forty years ago: The search for the

highest rating means appealing to the lowest common denominator. That approach is not just morally wrong; it also is a bad business model.

The Project for Excellence in Journalism has monitored local newscasts in fifty cities since 1998. It found the most popular topic was crime, accounting for almost one in every four stories—during a period in which the national crime rate has been dropping.

Covering crime is easy. It does not require much thought or staff. It makes for powerful pictures. The stories appeal to our basest emotions. It is the “stuff” produced for the lowest common denominator.

Viewers, however, see through the ultimate falseness of a newscast that distorts the community in which they live. They prefer quality, as the Project for Excellence’s study shows. According to a recent report, nearly half the stations with the highest quality newscasts improved their ratings over the five years, compared to 38% of those with the worst newscasts.²

The gap was even wider in the quest for the key demographic of viewers between 18 and 54. Here, 40% of the stations with “A” newscasts improved their ratings, compared to none of the “F” newscasts and 19% of those graded a “C” or “D.” The higher-quality stations also did a better job of keeping their lead-in audiences.³

To quote from the study: “Quality journalism is not just incidental. It’s actually good business.”⁴

But quality journalism requires an investment that too many station owners have been reluctant to make. They will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars for technology so reporters can do a live shot from an empty building where something happened hours earlier, but they will not hire enough reporters to move beyond an events-driven news menu. And then they wonder why local television news is losing viewers.

The broadcast journalists I respect are not satisfied with this situation. They are journalists first, broadcasters second. They recognize that what we do is more than a job, more than a profit center. It is a calling, the only profession singled out in the Constitution for protection. They would rather work in a garden than a wasteland. When their ranks grow, the wasteland will shrink.

2. Atiba Pertilla & Todd Belt, *How Strong Is the Case for Quality?*, COLUM. JOURNALISM REV., Nov./Dec. 2002, at 91.

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

