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ABSTRACT

The performance of local television stations with regard to programming and employment practices is a topic that lends itself well to investigation by journalism educators and their students. This paper examines the purposes of such a study and tells how to define the scope of the study and how to start it. It then offers suggestions for conducting three types of research: studying program listings, such as those in "TV Guide" and in the local newspaper; scrutinizing the public files of local stations; and monitoring the stations under study, from sign-on to sign-off. The paper describes the numerous types of materials that are contained in a television station's public file, and it shows how these materials may be used to gain vital information about the policies and practices of the station. (GW)

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Student-assisted Evaluation of Television Stations

Within a State

by

Steve Weinberg

Reporter

Des Moines Register

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A paper for the 1977 AEJ Convention in Madison, Wis.

By Steve Weinberg, staff writer, Des Moines (Iowa) Sunday Register

Almost everyone who watches television--and that is almost everyone--has complained about his or her local station. The complaint might be minor, such as a long football game delaying a news special. Or it might be more serious, such as a movie with wanton violence.

Despite the love-hate relationship that millions of viewers have with the stations they watch, station performance has generally been ignored by Journalists as a topic for study. It is a topic, however, that lends itself well to reporting.

This paper will suggest how Journalism educators and their students can conduct investigations of television station programming and employment practices. A class approach is preferable to an individual approach because a lot of information must be gathered, charted and evaluated.

The end result of such a study should be obvious. The class might release the findings to the media as a subject for stories. Better yet, the class might arrange in advance with a specific medium interested in using the findings. This would increase incentive and allow the class to communicate with a specific editor as questions arise on how to proceed. If the class cannot find a willing outlet, perhaps money can be obtained to publish independently and distribute the results directly to what will surely be an interested citizenry.

The study can be conducted at any time, but for optimum impact it should begin several months before the date that all television licenses in a particular state expire. All licensees must renew their privilege to use the public airwaves every three years. At two-month intervals, the stations in one or more states come up for consideration by the Federal Communications Commission. For example, all Texas stations came up for renewal this month.

A study will be especially interesting to citizens who are unhappy about their local stations and would like to take action. Objections to a license renewal can be filed any time. However, a formal petition to deny the renewal is due at the FCC at least 30 days before the license expires. That means the study should be published more than 30 days before the license expiration if it is to have maximum practical application for readers.

Doing the study as renewal time approaches has another advantage. It means students will have up-to-date information to work from. That is because stations must submit their renewal applications at least 90 days before the expiration date. The application contains a wealth of data, and it is a public document on file at the station's main office during regular business hours.

This paper draws heavily on a study of Iowa television stations conducted in 1976 by the Des Moines Sunday Register in conjunction with former FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson. A series of articles based on the findings ran on three consecutive Sundays beginning Dec. 26, 1976. Iowa station licenses expired on Feb. 1, 1977.

The Register study, in which this author participated, was far from perfect. The main problem was poor presentation of the material. In that sense, it is as much a model of what not to do as of what to do. But the techniques used to gather data on 18 television stations were sound.

This paper also draws heavily on two other sources. One is a 1973 FCC Report titled "Broadcasting in America: The Performance of Network Affiliates in the Top 50 Markets." It is a case study prepared by then Commissioner Johnson and some of his seminar students at Georgetown University. The second source is a 1976 report by the National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting, a Washington D.C. public interest group headed by Johnson. It is titled "Ohio-Michigan Television Station Performance: An Analysis and Ranking."

After a commitment is made to a study of television station performance, it is necessary to define the scope of the study. A professor at a university in a city with one television station could have the class devote all its resources to studying that station. But a study comparing a number of stations is more meaningful, because programming and employment practices are not absolutely positive or negative; rather, they are relative. By seeing how the local station stacks up against others, the viewer will get an idea of whether he is being deprived.

The Des Moines Sunday Register study examined 13 stations based in Iowa, as well as two in Illinois and three in Nebraska that serve major Iowa markets. Only over-the-air commercial stations were included. Cable television and the public broadcasting outlets were not included. Participants in the study were three Register reporters, working part-time; one Register city editor; an aide to Nicholas Johnson, working part-time from Washington D.C.; and Johnson himself.

There is no one correct way to conduct a study of television station performance. What follows is simply a suggested method.

A good beginning is to gain an understanding of a television station's obligations to its viewers as set forth by the FCC. Two primers published by the government are "The FCC and Broadcasting" and "The Public and Broadcasting--A Procedure Manual." There are also hundreds of periodical articles, court decisions and books available.

After the basic reading is completed, it is time to begin measuring how stations are meeting their obligations. Basically, there are three types of research to be done:

- 1) Studying programming listings such as TV Guide and those in the local newspaper.
- 2) Scrutinizing the vast information at individual stations that must be kept pursuant to FCC regulations.
- 3) Watching the stations under study from sign-on to sign-off, making extensive notations.

Programming listings will show what types of shows stations do, and do not, air. Studying the listings carried in the Des Moines Sunday Register indicated that a station in Sioux City, Iowa, had no local newscasts. That indication was followed up and became a major part of one of the three stories in the newspaper series. Also garnered from the listings was such information as this:

**On a Tuesday at 9 p.m., the stations broadcasting to Iowans offered three choices. There was //Police Story// on the six NBC affiliates, //Switch// on the six CBS affiliates and //Family// on the six ABC affiliates. In other words, there was no non-network programming. **On the same Tuesday at 9 a.m., the listings showed more variety. The largest number of stations aired the game show //The Price Is Right.// Other choices included //Phil Donahue,// //Mike Douglas,// //Good Morning America,// //Sanford and Son,// and //Woman.//

Just from looking at those two time slots, the researchers were able to print the following observations:

//Most Iowans might as well be watching the three networks/ programming direct from New York via satellite or cable...The choice-- between //Police Story// and //Switch,// for instance--often isn't much of a choice at all. Although local stations have the legal right to preempt a network program for something local, or of better or worse quality, they seldom do...Even during the hours of the day when the networks do not provide programming for the Iowa stations, such as 9 a.m., there is little locally originated programming (guest shows, public affairs specials, children's programs)...Among station managers, there is a wide difference in program choices for those periods when they can select what they want. Some opt for informative programs (//Phil Donahue// or //Good Morning America//). Others choose straight entertainment (//The Price Is Right// or reruns of //Sanford and Son//).//

A study of programming listings should supply a lot of questions for broadcasters themselves when the interviewing stage begins. Here are a few that might be appropriate:

Why does the local news run when it does? Why do you often substitute old movies for network public affairs programs? Why are most of your shows aimed at children bunched together on one morning?

After the programming listings have been thoroughly studied, it is time to visit the stations for a reading of their public files. If the experience of previous researchers is any guide, many stations will offer resistance. But any member of the public has a right to see the files during normal business hours. FCC regulations leave no doubt about that. Here is what the regulations say:

//The file shall be maintained at the main studio of the station, or at any accessible place (such as a public registry for documents or an attorney's office) in the community to which the station is or is proposed to be licensed, and shall be available for public inspection at any time during regular business hours.//

Some stations that do grant access to their files without a fight might be resistant to photocopying requests. But, again, FCC regulations are specific:

//Copies of any material in the public file of any television station shall be available for machine reproduction upon request made in person, provided the requesting party shall pay the reasonable cost of reproduction. Requests for machine copies shall be fulfilled at a location specified by the licensee, within a reasonable period of time, which in no event shall be longer than seven days.//

The public file contains so many vital pieces of information that a complete listing would be tiresome. The place to start is with the application for license renewal. Here are some of the most revealing documents contained within the application:

**A listing, which is supposed to be updated annually, of what the station considers to be the most significant problems and needs of the area it serves. The problems and needs are generally ascertained by interviews with dozens of community residents.

Opposite each problem or need, the station must list examples of programs broadcast in an attempt to meet the problem or need. A station by station comparison of how much programming was aired to meet pressing social problems can be revealing.

**A listing of how many public service announcements were aired by the station in the composite week designated by the FCC. The composite week is the basis for many statistics in the public file. At the end of the year, the FCC selects seven days at random (one Sunday, one Monday and so forth). These seven days are the composite week for that year. The station must show how many public service announcements it broadcast during the hours 8 a.m. to 11 p.m.--when

presumably a large number of viewers would see the spots--and those broadcast between 11 p.m. and 8 a.m., when presumably few viewers would be tuned in. The FCC also requires stations to indicate how many public service announcements were for organizations operating in the station's service area, and how many were for organizations operating outside the service area. The number and timing of public service announcements are important, because they represent a major part of a broadcaster's contention that he is fulfilling his obligation as a public trustee. Stations do not receive money for showing the spots.

**A listing of advertising practices on shows aimed at children aged 12 and under. The FCC specifically asks for hours in which commercials on children's shows topped 12 minutes per hour Monday through Friday and 9 1/2 minutes per hour Saturday and Sunday. The listing of advertising practices is accompanied by a listing of programs or program segments broadcast for children. Because many children spend more time with the television set than they do with their school-teachers, how well a station programs for children is a fit subject for inquiry by a journalism class.

**A listing of commercial practices during the composite week. The FCC asks for how many hours the station showed up to 8 minutes of commercials, from 8 to 12 minutes, from 12 to 16 minutes, and over 16 minutes. The same breakdown is required for prime-time viewing, defined as from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. on the East Coast and from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. in the remainder of the country.

**A listing of non-entertainment programming in the composite week. Such programming is divided into three types--news, public affairs, and other. The "other" might include farm reports, religious shows and instructional segments. How much time a station devotes to non-entertainment programming, as opposed to movies, sports and game shows, says a lot about the station's philosophy.

**A statement of what the station proposes to do in several areas in the upcoming year. In various sections of the renewal application, the station is asked about how much time it plans to devote to non-entertainment programming, how many public service announcements it plans to broadcast, and how many hours chock-filled with commercials it might show. Publishing such projections as part of an investigation may or may not be desirable, but the projections have the obvious value of a checkpoint in any follow-up look at station performance. If a station tells the FCC, in an effort to get its license renewed, that certain minimum standards will be met, and it turns out later that the standards were not met, that is a legitimate news story.

There are many other revealing documents in the public file, some of them part of the license renewal application at certain stations, some of them not. But wherever they are in the file, they

should be examined:

****Ownership reports.** It is interesting, and it may be significant, whether the local station is owned by local people or by people living half a continent away. FCC Form 323 shows the station's stockholders, partners, officers and directors. It shows the amount of stock held by each officer and director, recent stock transactions, and ownership by the licensee of other broadcast properties. Here is an example of how the Sunday Register used the information in Form 323 to describe the ownership of WHO-TV, one of two big stations based in Des Moines:

//Owner--Palmer Broadcasting.

Other stations--WHO-AM and KLYF-FM, Des Moines; WOC-TV, WOC-AM and KIK-FM, Davenport; WNOG-AM and WCVU-FM, Naples, Fla.

Palmer owns and operates cable television systems in Florida and California. Dr. David D. Palmer is president and votes more than 96 per cent of the stock. Palmer, who lives in Davenport, is the president of the board of trustees of Palmer College of Chiropractic, which his father and grandfather founded, and which is owned by the non-profit Palmer College Foundation. Palmer also owns an equipment leasing firm and a real estate rental firm in Davenport, and is a director of a bank in Florida. A couple of the minor shareholders also hold small interests in Lee Enterprises, which owns numerous television, radio and newspaper properties. //

****The station's equal employment opportunity program, along with a listing of employment discrimination complaints filed against the station.** Also in the public file are annual employment reports, with their detailed breakdown of how well, or how poorly, the station has done filling responsible positions with women and minority group members.

****Letters from the public.** At a station in a major market, there will likely be hundreds of these. Some are not worth reading--to say they come from crackpots is to be kind. But others are fascinating, and occasionally newsworthy. Follow-up interviews with prominent community members who have written complaining letters can produce good story leads. If station personnel are not willing to show the letters from the public, or if they appear to be holding some back, they should be reminded of this section from FCC regulations: //All written comments and suggestions received from members of the public concerning operations of the station shall be maintained in a local file available for inspection by the public, except when the person making the comment or suggestion has specifically requested that his communication not be made public or where the licensee feels that it should be excluded from availability for public inspection because of the special nature of its content, such as a defamatory or obscene letter. Letters shall be retained in the local

file for three years from the date on which they are received by the licensee. Letters received by television licensees shall be placed in one of the following separated subject categories: programming and non-programming. If comments in one letter relate to more than one subject category, the correspondence shall be filed under the category which, in the licensee's judgment, receives the most attention in the letter. //

The mass of figures pulled from the public file can be used not only in the text of whatever the class writes, but also can be put into chart form. All three studies mentioned earlier in this paper made liberal use of charts to help readers of the studies see how the stations ranked. Here are headings from some of the charts:

- //Total Hours of News Programming//
- //Total Hours of Public Affairs Programming//
- //Total Hours of Other Non-entertainment Programming//
- //Total Hours of Local News, Public Affairs and Other Non-entertainment Programming//
- //Total Hours of All Local Programming//
- //Total Number of Public Service Announcements in the Composite Week//
- //Amount of Commercial Time Exceeding 12 Minutes per Hour in the Composite Week//
- //Percentage of Minorities Employed Compared to the Percentage of Minorities in the Metropolitan Area//
- //Percentage of Minorities Employed in High-paying Positions//
- //Percentage of Female Employment//
- //Percentage of Females Employed in High-paying Positions//

In the Sunday Register series, some charts ranking stations on a number of factors at once were run. For example, one chart showing how the 18 stations ranked, first through 18th, in 14 categories was used. Consolidating a lot of information in one chart can be a handy tool for readers who do not like to flip pages from one chart to another.

Some information gathered during research was never charted, but was included in the text. For instance, there was a section telling how researchers--who did not identify themselves as Journalists--were treated after asking to see the public file. Here are some excerpts:

//At WOC in Davenport, the visitor was told the file wasn't available because the station's general manager was out of town. This was a clear violation of FCC rules...Access finally was gained at WOC after the visitor insisted on his rights and pulled out a copy of the FCC rules. Members of the public wishing to see the file might not have been so insistent, and probably wouldn't have been armed with a copy of the rules...But access to the files is

Just the beginning. A visitor may find himself examining the files in a cramped cubicle without a writing surface, as at KMEG in Sioux City. Or he may be given a full office to work in (KGLO, Mason City). He may be watched like a hawk--at WOI in Ames, an employe stayed in the room the entire time, and when she left for lunch, she asked the visitor to leave and return in an hour. Or he may be left entirely alone (KETV in Omaha, Neb.). The file may be orderly and in one place, or it may be an almost unworkable mess, scattered around several offices. //

The Sunday Register series also discussed some of the Fairness Doctrine complaints filed against Iowa television stations at the FCC. A few of the complaints were interesting enough to lead to separate articles done apart from the series.

After the public files have been thoroughly examined, it is time to monitor the stations from sign-on to sign-off. This was not done in the Sunday Register series, but only because of lack of time and staff.

Probably the best way to decide on what to monitor is to hold some informal viewing sessions as a class, in which the station's programming is merely observed. Afterwards, the class can discuss the significance of what it has seen, and what questions the programming raises.

No matter what the class decides to look for during monitoring, it will need forms on which to record precisely what was aired. The forms should have columns for time of day, program category (entertainment, news, education, commercial, public service announcement, etc.), and the name of the program itself.

Certain programs can be analyzed in depth. For instance, on the half-hour local newscast, how many minutes are actually devoted to news? In other words, how much of the half-hour is devoted to weather, to sports, to entertainment-fluff pieces and to commercials? Are there controversial topics that never seem to make the newscast, even though the newspaper in the city has covered the topics? Are there some segments of the community, such as blacks, who are overlooked? How much of the "local news" actually consists of the anchorperson reading national or international wire copy?

On entertainment programs, what is the level of violence? There are violence scales, such as one prepared by the National Institute of Mental Health, that can be used in rating the amount of violence shown on particular stations.

In evaluating station performance through monitoring, it might be enlightening to compare certain findings with what the broadcaster proposed to do on the license renewal application. If the licensee

proposed to devote 10 per cent of his broadcast week to news and public affairs programming, the monitoring data should show if the percentage is being observed. During a 15-hour broadcast day, there should be 1 1/2 hours of such programming.

The results of the monitoring, assuming the class carries it out for at least one week, can be compared with the programming reported by the station for its FCC-designated composite week. At times, the differences might be significant, because the particular days chosen for the composite week might skew the results. In 1975, for example, the composite week included a day on which NBC ran a three-hour public affairs special in prime time. Therefore, all NBC affiliates had prime-time public affairs statistics that were unusually high.

Not all of the monitoring has to be done with a stopwatch, although a stopwatch is unquestionably a necessary tool. For instance, the United Church of Christ has designed several observer report forms that involve some subjectivity on the part of the monitor. One form, that could be used in a city with a large Spanish-speaking population, has these columns: a description of the incident in which a Spanish-surnamed person appears or in which a minority issue involving a Spanish-surnamed person is discussed; the number of Spanish-surnamed persons appearing; the number of those persons who actually spoke; whether there was discussion by those persons of any issue involving their minority group; and the length of time devoted to the described incident.

On the flip side of the five-column form are several questions that the monitor is to answer after the program is over. The questions are intended to elicit the monitor's reaction to the handling of the particular issue.

Once the class has completed all of its research, the report must be written. It is probably best to have one or two students do the writing, so that the style is consistent. The writers should begin analyzing the information submitted to them long before the research is finished, so that any problems with the data can be uncovered early and corrected.