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Influences of News Programming Techniques and
News Market Conditions in Detroit on the
Restructuring of WJBK-TV News, 1981-1983 in
Relation to WDIV-TV and WXYZ-TV News Operations:
A Systematic Study

presented by

Josef Steven Olsavsky

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INFLUENCES OF NEWS PROGRAMMING TECHNIQUES
AND NEWS MARKET CONDITIONS IN DETROIT
ON THE RESTRUCTURING OF WJBK-TV NEWS, 1981-1983
IN RELATION TO WDIV-TV AND WXYZ-TV
NEWS OPERATIONS: A SYSTEMATIC STUDY

By

JOSEF STEVEN OLSAVSKY

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ABSTRACT

INFLUENCES OF NEWS PROGRAMMING TECHNIQUES AND NEWS MARKET CONDITIONS IN DETROIT ON THE RESTRUCTURING OF WJBK-TV NEWS, 1981-1983 IN RELATION TO WDIV-TV AND WXYZ-TV NEWS OPERATIONS: A SYSTEMATIC STUDY

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The objective of this study is the identification of television news programming techniques and their implications in the Detroit market with specific reference to the personnel changes which took place at WJBK-TV between 1981 and 1983. The analysis of the Detroit market is extended beyond this time frame to better illustrate the necessity for the changes at WJBK-TV.

In addition to the analysis of newspaper, magazine and journal items, personal interviews were held with news management personnel at each of the Detroit network affiliated television stations as well as market research directors and sales personnel.

Specifically, the study examines the relationship between the Arbitron and Nielsen ratings and the financial status of the station's receiving such ratings. At the same time, the study examines programming techniques utilized to improve a station's news performance.

The study illustrates the entertainment orientation of TV news and the efforts made therein to provide a given audience with the friendly, trustable news personalities it desires. In the process, many facets of news programming are examined,

ABSTRACT

including: the importance of adjacent programming in providing an audience; the use of research on audience and its perceptions of news personnel and news programming; methods utilized in the development of a desirable image for a newscast or newsperson; the importance of news relative to a station's overall performance; reasons behind the high salaries of on-air talent; demographic and psychographic profile of the viewing audience; the use of promotion; and the loyalty of the Detroit audience to its media personalities.

Generally, the study illustrates the importance of the persons delivering the news to its audience and why, as a result, poor news ratings often cause a turnover in on-air and management personnel.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Ruth E. Williams, and my sister, Kathryn A. Brown, whose encouragement aided me in the completion of this project.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND ASSUMPTIONS AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

THE PERVASIVE NATURE OF TV NEWS

With our ever-increasing technology and access to cable and video systems, the reliance on television for news is at its highest level ever, as is reflected in the results of the 1982 Roper study: 65 percent of Americans surveyed reported television as their primary source of news¹, an astonishing figure given the medium's limited capabilities in news coverage. With only 22 minutes allotted for news, sports and weather in each half-hour newscast, it has been argued that television news is little more than a "headline news service."² Walter Cronkite often found that his half-hour script, "would not fill three quarters of a newspaper page."³ Current CBS News president Van Gordon Sauter considers the evening news to be little more than a snapshot.⁴ Nevertheless, televised news appeals to the public.

¹"Once again public votes TV number one news medium," Broadcasting, April 11, 1983, p. 34.

²Thomas Griffith, "Who elected CBS?" Time, April 4, 1983, p. 69.

³Thomas Griffith, "Where do you get your news?" Time, December 6, 1982, p. 88.

⁴William Oscar Johnson, "Bio: Van Gordon Sauter," People Weekly, May 30, 1983, p. 70.

This reliance on television for news substantiates the findings of communications theorists. Leon Festinger, in his theory of cognitive dissonance, found that people practice selective perception; we watch what we want to watch and tune out other programming.⁵ Joseph T. Klapper found the more personal medium to be the most effective. With television ranking behind only person-to-person methods of obtaining information with respect to its personal nature, its impact is likely to be greater than that of newspapers.⁶ Wilbur Schramm found that, "in general, there seems to be greater expectation of reward when there appears to be greater possibility of the reader identifying himself with the news."⁷ Schramm's theory of pleasure in news reading accounts for immediate and delayed rewards in news reception. Aesthetic subjects, such as news of science, education and public affairs, have a delayed reward while those of immediate reward include, "news of crime and corruption, accidents and disasters, sports and recreation, social events and human interest."⁸ Schramm also found the method of news presentation to be important:

Position, headline, size, color, timing, voice (if any), are important to the choice. . . . Likewise, when a newscaster shouts "Flash!" or "Bulletin!" he is putting his personal endorsement on an item.⁹

⁵Leon Festinger, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 158.

⁶Joseph T. Klapper, The Effects of Mass Communication, (New York: The Free Press, 1960), p. 70.

⁷Wilbur Schramm, "The Nature of News," Journalism Quarterly, September, 1949, p. 265. ⁸IBID., p. 260.

⁹IBID.

William Stephenson incorporated Schramm's theory of pleasure in his concept of communication pleasure. In Stephenson's play theory, self-enhancement is viewed as communication pleasure. He utilizes ludenic theory, from Callois's ludus, or formal play with rules where a skill is developed through the play¹⁰ as well as Huizinga's concept of playing as a source of cultural evolution.¹¹ Stephenson, using his own Q-method, tested G.D. Wiebe's study of the Army-McCarthy hearings. Wiebe had found that many viewed the hearings as a sort of super-ego fantasy, "by reintrojecting (as they had done as children) the 'lone hero' as a great father figure, powerful, feared, and yet to be respected."¹² Using women as his subjects, Stephenson found four factors: A) women of good sense; B) archaic thinkers; C) the self-righteous woman; and D) the non-involved.¹³ It was in factor B where Stephenson found the respondents to resemble the personalities described by Wiebe, noting that, as with father figures, "the women felt it was right to assume guilt until a man is proven innocent."¹⁴ Stephenson's analysis of the situation in play theory terms follows:

The Army-McCarthy hearings were of course real events. Broadcast on television they could instead become drama as "Oedipus Rex" is drama. . . . The first English plays had such characters as Toil, Hunger, Poverty, Discord, Envy and Deceit. . . . McCarthy engendered such a fixed form: a man of Wrath--devouring imaginary Communists, joyless, sardonic--with whom thousands of relatively undeveloped people identified.¹⁵

¹⁰William Stephenson, The Play Theory of Mass Communication, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 41. ¹¹IBID., p. 37. ¹²IBID., p. 170. ¹³IBID., p. 173. ¹⁴IBID., p. 175. ¹⁵IBID., p. 168.

What becomes apparent is that theorists have found a degree of entertainment in news which affects the audiences' acceptance of a given packaged news format. Though fiction outdraws news on a daily basis, important news stories often bring in large audiences. In fact, ex-CBS News Director William Small noted that the largest audience in every year of the 1960s was for a news event:

In 1960, 1964 and 1966 it was election night which drew the year's largest audience. In 1961, the heaviest single day of viewing was during John F. Kennedy's Inaugural address. In 1962, it was John Glenn's suborbital flight, 1963 the four days of Kennedy's assassination and funeral, in 1965 the Gemini-Titan IV space shot, in 1967 it was Lyndon Johnson's State of the Union address and in 1968 the Democratic National convention. The greatest number of viewers in the decade... came in 1969 when Apollo XI reached the moon.¹⁶

THE COST OF TV NEWS OPERATION

In spite of the large audiences for news, networks have traditionally lost money on this aspect of their programming efforts, which is to be provided as a public service. In 1968, for example, coverage of election returns alone cost the networks a combined total of \$10 million.¹⁷ Reuven Frank, NBC News president, noted at the time that, "news isn't supposed to be a big profit maker."¹⁸ Elmer W. Lower, then ABC News president, took "pride in noting that 1968 will be the year that his department spent the most money in its history--\$33 million--and got only about half of it back."¹⁹

There are two main reasons that news departments were

¹⁶William Small, To Kill A Messenger: Television News and the Real World, (New York: Hastings House, 1970), p. 6.

¹⁷"TV can't cover losses in covering the news," Business Week, November 2, 1968, p. 64. ¹⁸IBID. ¹⁹IBID.

consistently running in the red: the cost of field correspondents and the cost of unscheduled events. In 1968, for example, it cost ABC \$1,000 a week "to field a three man film crew--and the network must keep a dozen in New York, 10 in Washington, a half dozen more in both Europe and Vietnam plus others in Tokyo, Hong Kong and such key spots," even if nothing happens.¹⁸ Coverage of Dwight Eisenhower's death cost CBS \$2.5 million, NBC \$2 million and ABC \$500,000. In 1969, NBC claimed a \$4 million annual expenditure solely for unexpected news coverage. In 1970, the NBC evening news, budgeted at \$7.2 million, brought in \$34 million in revenues, but the news division still lost money, "because of the cost of producing documentaries and covering unscheduled disasters."²⁰

Barbara Matusow, in her 1983 book, The Evening Stars, explained that news no longer loses money:

As audiences for news grew steadily in the seventies and advertisers overcame their traditional distaste for sponsoring news programs, the gap between revenues and expenditures steadily narrowed. According to Variety, news rose from "a 15 percent loss position in 1972" to contribute one percent of the profits for the three networks in 1975 and 1976.²¹

Surprisingly, the networks were, and are, reluctant to publicize their profits from news programming. Arthur Taylor, CBS, Inc., president from 1972 to 1976, explained the reason for this attitude:

¹⁸"TV can't cover losses in covering the news," Business Week, November 2, 1968, p. 64.

¹⁹Small, To Kill a Messenger, pp. 5-6.

²⁰Barbara Matusow, The Evening Stars: The Making of the Network News Anchor, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1983), p. 156. ²¹IBID.

The thinking was if you are a broadcaster and charged with performing a public service, it was a good idea to be able to tell the FCC, 'Well, I do make all this money, but on the other hand, I have to be able to support our big loss leader, the news division.' And if your big loss leader, to which you are making large, financial contributions to serve the public, is making money, it doesn't look like you're doing all that much of a public service, does it?²²

Nevertheless, networks can no longer deny that news programming makes money and that it has been doing so for a few years. Even the "Huntley-Brinkley Report" became profitable after it went to a half-hour; in fact, according to Matusow, it was NBC's top source of revenue, surpassing "Laugh-In" and "Saturday Night at the Movies."²³ In 1981, according to NBC vice-president for TV network sales, Robert C. Blackmore, news programming accounted for nearly 10 percent of network advertising revenues, an estimated \$5.5 billion to \$6 billion.²⁴ "60 Minutes," regularly rated among the top ten shows, commanded the highest advertising rate on prime-time TV in 1982: \$175,000 for a 30-second ad.²⁵

As revenues increased, so did network news budgets. Estimates in late 1982 put the CBS news budget at \$225 million a year, ABC at "slightly less than CBS," and NBC at \$215 million.²⁶ Currently, the networks are trying to hold the lid on these budgets. Robert Chandler, senior vice president of CBS News explained that, "year-to-year spending increased 20 percent the

²²Matusow, Evening Stars, pp. 156-157. ²³IBID., p. 156.

²⁴"A bright picture for ads on TV news," Business Week, August 10, 1981, p. 26.

²⁵Matusow, Evening Stars, p. 35.

²⁶Diane Mermigas, "TV nets end news expansion in cost-cutting bid," Advertising Age, Dec. 13, 1982, p. 34.

last four or five years, but that revenues increased only 15 percent. Management decided that we cannot go on indefinitely that way."²⁷ The networks have found themselves faced with

The networks face the same costs: unexpected events, such as the 11-week war in the Falklands, which cost the networks between \$2 million and \$4 million apiece²⁸; and the cost for overseas bureaus, estimated in 1982 at \$1 million a year "to maintain even a 'shoestring' bureau."²⁹ As a result, all networks are cutting back funds from their Hong Kong bureaus and NBC has also cut down on its Cairo and Houston staffs while CBS has closed its Bonn bureau and dismissed 25 employees.³⁰ At the same time, NBC cancelled its "Overnight" newscast because its revenues did not offset its \$7 million production costs.³¹ On the positive side, ABC's 1982 operating profits of \$262 million (compared to CBS's \$180 million and NBC's \$30 million)³² have made it possible for ABC to pay \$316.5 million for the 1984 Olympic games; ABC has already sold over \$600 million in up-front ads for the games.³³ Added to the increased revenues all three networks expect for election coverage, 1984 should be a good year.

TV NEWS AND THE RATINGS GAME

Given the profitability of TV news, its programming concerns

²⁷Mermigas, "TV nets end expansion," p. 35.

²⁸Sally Bedell, "Why TV news can't be a complete view of the world," New York Times, Aug. 8, 1982, p. B1.

²⁹IBID., p. B21.

³⁰Mermigas, "TV nets end expansion," pp. 34-35.

³¹"Forecast & Review," Advertising Age, Jan. 2, 1984, p. 29.

³²Steven Flax, "Squeeze on the networks," Fortune, Sept. 5, 1983, p. 90. ³³IBID., p. 93.

are now the same as those "for a prime time series: achieving the largest possible audience."³⁵ Audience for news is measured in the same fashion as is the audience for entertainment shows; the rating services of A.C. Nielsen and Arbitron provide these measurements. The most quoted of the two is the national Nielsen rating, based on a sample of 1,200 homes across the United States.³⁶ The basic tool of the A.C. Nielsen Co. is the audimeter, a device which, when attached to a television set, reflects who watches what at a given period of time. These ratings are of extreme importance to the economics of the medium; advertisers base their spending practices on the ratings while television salesmen adjust their costs as a result of ratings increases or decreases. Moreover, the importance of ratings in relation to advertising revenues is on the increase. While 1982 estimates placed the value of a single rating point at \$7 million in annual advertising revenue,³⁷ 1983 estimates place the annual value of a single rating point at \$25 million.³⁸ By 1983 estimates, CBS stands to make \$125 million more in revenues as a result of its 25 percent share of the audience for its 7 p.m. newscast than both NBC and ABC, each with a 20 percent share.³⁹ Quite simply, advertisers are willing to

³⁵Tony Schwartz, "When news goes show biz," The New York Times, August 9, 1981, p. D23.

³⁶A. Frank Reel, The Networks: How They Stole the Show, (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1979), p. 87.

³⁷Harry F. Waters, Lucy Howard and George Hackett, "Star Wars in TV News," Newsweek, April 12, 1982, p. 72.

³⁸"Television: casting the anchor," The Economist, September 3, 1983, p. 24. ³⁹IBID.

pay extra to advertise on a highly rated show. Thus, when CBS began to catch up to ABC in the daytime soap ratings, CBS was able to increase its price for daytime commercials by 25 percent.⁴⁰ The departure of Walter Cronkite from the CBS Evening News and the subsequent decline in ratings caused the cost for a 30-second commercial to drop \$10,000. Conversely, when CBS regained news dominance with a two percent lead, the price returned to the \$40,000 that the Cronkite era news show commanded.⁴¹ The reason for this is that advertisers tend to "make their purchases on a cost-per-thousand-homes-reached basis."⁴²

Since the ratings game is an on-going process, there is no way to be absolutely certain that a show which does well in the May ratings period will do as well in October. For this reason, there will always be some risk in television ad sales and purchases. For scatter sales, or advertisements sold for one show on the basis of the most recent ratings, the risk to the advertiser may be less, but the cost may be higher than up-front sales, or advertisements purchased early.⁴³ The risk, however, is on both sides, as CBS officials learned in 1982. CBS's economists, expecting the recession to decline, advised the network to hold off on its up-front sales in the hopes of higher scatter sales. When scatter sales proved unproductive, CBS was left with a bulk of high priced time on its hands.⁴⁴

⁴⁰Flax, "Squeeze on the networks," p. 93.

⁴¹Sally Bedell, "CBS News holding its lead," New York Times, August 4, 1982, p. C23.

⁴²Edward Jay Epstein, News From Nowhere, (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 79.

⁴³Flax, "Squeeze on networks," p. 85. ⁴⁴IBID., p. 90.

The financial importance of ratings has led to some interesting programming decisions. At CBS, for example, a made-for-TV-movie was shown over a Carter "Fireside Chat" on the pending Panama Canal treaties and, in a move that caused former CBS News chief Fred Friendly to resign in disgust, "I Love Lucy" reruns were shown in place of the Senate foreign relations committee hearings on the continuation of the Vietnam War.⁴⁵

The networks' approach to their audiences is one of market segmentation and market positioning. As with businesses, the networks must analyze the market structure and then determine what position within that market would be most beneficial. As a result, they must consult data on the psychographics and demographics of their audiences. Age, sex and income of the viewers all help determine the type of programming as well as the rates charged for advertisements during such programming. "A program which attracts a higher-than-average percentage of men or one that appeals to young adults can charge higher rates."⁴⁶ The 14-to-49 age group and upscale (or upper income) audiences are the most important to advertisers.⁴⁷ As a result, a highly rated show may be dropped for drawing the wrong audience. Such was the fate of the Lawrence Welk show, dropped because its appeal was to viewers over 49⁴⁸ and "Hee Haw," dropped because rural viewers are not as desirable as urban viewers.⁴⁹ It should be

⁴⁵Reel, The Networks, pp. 98-99.

⁴⁶Matusow, Evening Stars, p. 160.

⁴⁷Flax, "Squeeze on the networks," p. 90.

⁴⁸Reel, The Networks, p. 8. ⁴⁹IBID., p. 9.

noted that, due to the varied psychographics and demographics of audiences, shows like those just mentioned often do well in syndication.

CBS has used "make goods," or free commercial space given to advertisers if the desired audience is not delivered, as a demographic/psychographic guarantee to up-front buyers.⁵⁰ This is a good method to ensure an audience, but it is also expensive and is therefore not always available.

THE IMPORTANCE AND INFLUENCE OF RESEARCH

Since most newscasts of a given geographical area tend to cover primarily the same stories, the ratings are seen as a reflection of the audiences' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with those people delivering the news. While the ratings services provide numbers, psychographics and demographics of viewing audiences, "they don't tell why viewers watch, or what they might prefer to see instead."⁵¹ This has become the job of the market researcher and news consultant, who have conducted extensive research concerning image, credibility and audience acceptance of the ever-visible personnel who bring us the news via television. In one such study, Frederick Williams outlined seven factors contributing to audience acceptance of newscasters. They are: general evaluation (beautiful-ugly); vocal confidence; vocal quality (light-heavy); apparent character; enthusiasm and receptivity; efficiency-reliability; and bias (biased-unbiased).⁵²

⁵⁰ Flax, "Squeeze on the Networks," p. 90.

⁵¹ Matusow, The Evening Stars, p. 161.

⁵² Frederick Williams, "A Factor Analysis of Judgments of Radio Newscasters," Journal of Broadcasting, Spring, 1963, p. 143.

In an unpublished study at Indiana University, Mervin Lynch, Dick Yoakum and Ludphy Argubee isolated six dimensions of judgment of local station television newscasters. They found professional nature, reliability, education, friendliness, style of presentation and attractiveness as factors in the selection processes of the 60 adults, parents and student friends in the study's sample.⁵³ A later study by Lynch and Leonard H. Sassenrath confirmed these findings.⁵⁴ Another study by Robert K. Tiemans suggests that camera angle alone may influence audience perception.⁵⁵ A study by Herschel Shosteck found voice and speech to be more important than professional characteristics as a basis for viewer appeal.⁵⁶ In a two year survey of nearly 1,000 people, Gerald M. Goldhaber found the viewers prefer, "a soothing, comfortable" and trustworthy personality.⁵⁷ In a study where the sample consisted of newscasters, the newscasters themselves, management, co-workers, and family were ranked as the strongest perceived sources of the newscasters' on-camera image.⁵⁸

⁵³Mervin D. Lynch and Leonard H. Sassenrath, "Dimensions of Personality Association of Television Network Newscasters," Journal of Broadcasting, Winter, 1965-66, p. 34.
⁵⁴IBID., p. 37.

⁵⁵Robert K. Tiemans, "Some Relationships of Camera Angle to Communicator Credibility," Journal of Broadcasting, Fall, 1970, p. 490.

⁵⁶Herschel Shosteck, "Factors Influencing Appeal of TV News Personalities," Journal of Broadcasting, Winter, 1973-74, p.70.

⁵⁷"Viewers found to favor a comfortable anchor," New York Times, April 28, 1981, p. C10.

⁵⁸Rick Houlberg and John Dimmick, "Influences of TV Newscasters' On-Camera Image," Journal of Broadcasting, Autumn, 1980, p. 485.

While the research just discussed gives a good general idea of what viewers desire in newscasters, it is not specific enough to have implications in any individual programming. This has become the job of news consultants, who, "using greatly refined techniques for measuring audience preferences, were able to pretest news formats, on-air personalities, even subject matter."⁵⁹ Barbara Matusow, in The Evening Stars, discusses the job and impact of news consultants:

...who advised stations on everything from sets, graphics, and personalities, to the kinds of news stories they should cover; anything, in short, that would boost ratings. As Broadcasting noted in a 1976 report on consultants: "It was the swiftness of some of those rating turnarounds that dazzled the industry and elevated the news consultant to reigning lords of local news." In 1970, for instance, WFIL-TV (later named WPVI) went from fourth to first place in news in Philadelphia within one year of retaining Frank Magid, one of the industry's best-known "news doctors."⁶⁰

Magid, sometimes called, "the think tank in the cornfield," employs 210 persons and services over 100 TV stations.⁶¹ Having been employed by ABC for many years, he has been credited with the slick packaging of ABC's local newscasts, "which were criticized for allegedly engaging in 'happy talk.'"⁶² In spite of the criticism, this style has been used in local newscasts throughout the United States and, as shall be more thoroughly discussed later, has begun to surface in national newscasts. Matusow gives a detailed analysis of the innovations that have become standardized as a result of consultants' advice. These innovations follow, in some cases supplemented with examples

⁵⁹ Matusow, Evening Stars, p. 161. ⁶⁰ IBID., p. 157.

⁶¹ Bob Marich, "NBC hires Magid research team," Advertising Age, December 19, 1983, p. 43. ⁶² IBID.

drawn from personal observations of television newscasts:

1. A faster paced newscast, including more items and shorter items. Magid, for example, recommended that stories read on camera be no longer than fifteen seconds, while film reports not exceed ninety seconds.
2. More sensationalism, including a heavier diet of such tabloid-style items as fires, crime, sex, accidents and the occult. San Francisco's KGO, another Magid client, whose call letters were jokingly referred to as "kickers, guts and orgasms," employed the formula so successfully in the early seventies that it was able to charge three times as much for commercial time on its newscasts as either of its competitors.
3. Greater emotional content. Consultants advised a de-emphasis of politics and institutional stories in favor of human interest stories. WDIV-TV in Detroit has employed this method so successfully that week-long human interest stories such as "City Nights," a look at night life in Detroit, and "A Gift for Serena," the story of a girl given the gift of speech by computer at Michigan State University, have been put together and repeated as half-hour specials at 11:30 p.m.
4. A consumer ombudsman. These, "on-your-side" reporters take the case of a victimized person and try to correct the wrong.
5. Advice on coping, or "news you can use." WDIV-TV utilized this with Jennifer Moore's, "Forgive Us Our Debts," a week-long feature on getting out, and staying out, of debt.
6. Reporter involvement, or showing the active nature of the reporter. All of the network affiliates in Detroit utilize this method, especially on key stories such as the Billy Sims lawsuit or the Detroit Auto Show. The anchors and sportscasters on these stories delivered their regular newscasts live from Pontiac and Detroit.
7. More humor, such as that of Andy Rooney. NBC's "Today" added Willard Scott delivering the weather in drag. In Detroit, WDIV-TV employs Dwayne X. Riley, a local version of Rooney, and Davy Marlin Jones, the eccentric movie reviewer who uses cards--keeping some, throwing some away and ripping some--to indicate the value he places on individual films.
8. The friendly anchor team. This is the "happy-talk" formula mentioned earlier.
9. Longer newscasts. In Detroit, WXYZ-TV (ABC) runs local news from 5 to 6:30 p.m. while WDIV-TV (NBC) and WJBK-TV (CBS) run local news from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.
10. More emphasis on local news.⁶²

The nature of the above standards is not far removed from the theories discussed earlier. Consultants also find

⁶²Matusow, The Evening Stars, pp. 157, 158, 159.

a degree of communication pleasure or reward from news and have suggested that it be packaged to make the most of such. This has understandably led to criticism; the entertainment function seems to be a larger concern to television news producers than the quality of the news itself.⁶³ In response to this criticism, CBS News president Van Gordon Sauter argued that, "all those up-scale people who criticize it can't put together one tenth of one percentage of a rating point between them."⁶⁴ Magid's response smacks less of emotion or bias. He advised one of his clients that:

Ratings rise when a broadcaster is successful in exposing the listener to what he wants to hear, in the very personal way he wants to hear it. In terms of news, this means ratings are improved not when listeners are told what they should know, but what they want to hear.⁶⁵

Tony Schwartz, TV writer for the New York Times, analyzed what all of this has meant at the local level:

What's happening is simple enough: News has become a hit, the largest source of revenue for many local stations. Not long ago, stations produced short, local news programs, mostly to meet their license obligations, and didn't expect to make money. But recently, stations have discovered that news--particularly when it's presented in jazzy, dramatic fashion--can be more entertaining than reruns of "Love Boat" and "Fantasy Island." And that suits local stations just fine. It is often cheaper to add a half-hour to a newscast than to fill the time slots with high-priced network reruns.⁶⁶

Given the financial success of the local style to news programming, it is no surprise that the networks now seem to

⁶³V.M. Mishra, "How Commercial Television Networks Cover News of Law Enforcement," Journalism Quarterly, Autumn, 1979, p. 611.

⁶⁴Matusow, Evening Stars, pp. 276-277. ⁶⁵IBID., p. 162.

⁶⁶Tony Schwartz, "When News Goes Show Biz," New York Times, August 9, 1981, p. D23.

be copying local news programming in their efforts to win the ratings war. Fred Friendly, who is quite critical of this style, has stated that, "what you are seeing is the localization of news. It's the technique of using very short pieces that don't demand much concentration, plenty of pace, film at 11, lots of happy talk."⁶⁷ News consultant Bruce Northcott believes that, "today, there is more of a 'Here's some information that is important, interesting and that you may be able to use' attitude," a style which he notes first surfaced on local newscasts.⁶⁸ Ed Godfrey, president-elect of the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA), notes that, "before, they would just end a story and go right into the break. Now, they are using teasers across the breaks, and they are making greater use of digital effects, things that local stations have been doing for years."⁶⁹ Gerry Solomon, executive producer of NBC's early morning news program, believes, "that you now find at least a predisposition to have reporter involvement in stories in subtle ways. You might, for example see a reporter walking with a source while the narration continues." This, "really began as a local phenomenon to identify local reporters to TV audiences and to identify local stations with their reporters."⁷⁰ Newsweek TV writer Harry Waters, noting that the industry calls this form "infotainment," described the CBS morning news as follows:

⁶⁷Tony Schwartz, "Ratings and CBS News' Upheavals," New York Times, Dec. 17, 1981, p. C17.

⁶⁸B.G. Yovovich, "Looking to local stations for inspiration," Advertising Age, Sept. 5, 1983, p. M5.

⁶⁹IBID. ⁷⁰IBID.

Charles Kuralt's ruminations have been replaced by the chatty badinage of cohosts Bill Kurtis and Diane Sawyer. The show now kicks off with "Star Wars" graphics and Luke Skywalker theme music and includes Hollywood gossip from a full-time entertainment reporter. All this has horrified journalistic purists, who regard CBS's new morning edition as a reversion to those Newcenter/Eyewitness/Action Team formats that inundate local stations.⁷¹

In addition to appearance, the networks have also tried to follow the local affiliates in the lengthening of the nightly news. Unfortunately for network programmers, however, they have been met with resistance. Tony Schwartz explained the reason:

...the resistance to accepting the extra half-hour of national news is simply a matter of money: it would cost most stations one of their richest sources of profit. Under the prime-time access rule, local stations now program one of the half-hours between 7 and 8 p.m.--and retain all the revenues from the commercial time sold during that period. . . . When the network provides programming to a station--including news--the local station is given only a small number of commercial spots to sell.⁷²

ABC affiliates voiced another concern in deciding whether to extend "Nightline" to one hour. They worried that, "the additional half-hour would 'dilute' the program's impact."⁷³ Add to these concerns the success of syndicated programs which, "run head-to-head with say, the 'CBS Evening News,' winning audiences and advertising dollars from network programs,"⁷⁴ and it becomes easy to understand why the affiliates are

⁷¹Harry F. Waters and Neal Karlen, "Crunch in the morning," Newsweek, Sept. 13, 1982, p. 84.

⁷²Tony Schwartz, "Local Stations Unhappy," New York Times, October 16, 1981, p. C19.

⁷³"Arledge reports on ABC News," Broadcasting, May 16, 1983, p. 76.

⁷⁴John S. DeMott, "Sharing that syndication gravy," Time, August 15, 1983, p. 47.

unwilling to accept a one-hour network newscast.

Tony Schwartz found that, "NBC has been the slowest of the three networks to adopt a glossier new look and style, but its evening news program is also consistently the lowest rated of the three."⁷⁵ With two recent announcements, the network seems to finally be adapting to the programming realities of news. For the first time, NBC has hired a consultant. Frank Magid Associates will begin working for NBC in 1984 after their ABC contract expires. Magid will, however, be retained at ABC's Detroit and San Francisco affiliates.⁷⁶ NBC will also have a new News president; Lawrence Grossman will replace Reuven Frank in May, 1984.⁷⁷ Grossman managed to persuade PBS stations to allow the one-hour extension of "The Macneil/Lehrer Report," which has prompted Diane Mermigas of Advertising Age to speculate that, "NBC officials could be looking for Mr. Grossman to work the same kind of magic with network affiliates, who have been resisting one-hour expansion of the "NBC Nightly News" for years."⁷⁸

While ABC News president Roone Arledge has been credited with changing the style, presentation and promotion of network news,⁷⁹ "there seems to be general agreement that CBS News has

⁷⁵ Tony Schwartz, "Why TV News Is Increasingly Being Packaged as Entertainment," New York Times, Oct. 17, 1982, p. B1.

⁷⁶ Marich, "NBC hires Magid," p. 43.

⁷⁷ Diane Mermigas, "NBC lands Grossman for News," Advertising Age, Dec. 12, 1983, p. 6. ⁷⁸ IBID.

⁷⁹ Tony Schwartz, "The tumult in TV News," New York Times, March 1, 1982, p. C15.

been in the forefront of implementing changes in its news operations."⁸⁰ Insofar as these changes were implemented as a result of sagging ratings, it seems worthwhile to examine the situation.

CBS NEWS REACTS TO THE RATINGS

As discussed earlier, CBS has enjoyed the ratings lead in news for years, but the ratings began to slip following the retirement of Walter Cronkite. Dan Rather, Cronkite's replacement, was obviously nervous about his role and, as Barbara Matusow explains, it showed on camera:

When Rather finally made his debut on March 6, 1981, an air of defeatism hung over the enterprise. For the first few months, Rather looked ill at ease on screen, his manner almost tentative as he tried out various styles of delivery. Principally, he was trying to project more warmth, an effort that sometimes caused him to smile in the wrong places.⁸¹

Whether it was Rather's awkwardness or Cronkite's absence, the ratings declined until they reached rock bottom: third place among the three networks in October, 1981.⁸² Changes had to be made. In mid-November, News president William Leonard "was abruptly displaced by Van Gordon Sauter." Matusow explains:

Although Leonard stayed on as president for a few more months, it was clear from the outset that his "deputy," Sauter, was in charge. The prospect of the Evening News's losing more viewers was considered too grave to wait six more months for Leonard to retire, whatever decency might dictate.⁸³

Just as the retirement of Leonard was moved up abruptly, Sauter's changes were also implemented in an abrupt fashion.

⁸⁰Yovovich, "Looking to local stations," p. M5.

⁸¹Matusow, The Evening Stars, p. 259. ⁸²IBID., p. 265.

⁸³IBID, p. 266.

"A shrewd manager with a track record of boosting ratings at local stations," Sauter quickly eliminated Cronkite's crew, added electronic music and provided a new, computerized set.⁸⁴ "On the morning news, both Charles Kuralt and his respected producer, Robert Northshield, were replaced with virtually no warning,"⁸⁵ the latter by George Merlis and the former by Bill Kurtis, who now co-anchors the show with Diane Sawyer. All are proven ratings boosters. Within two months of taking charge, Sauter changed 20 of the top jobs in the network's news division.⁸⁶ Insiders dubbed the moves, "Sauter on Tenth Avenue."⁸⁷ One critic is former CBS News president Fred Friendly, who finds it difficult to establish a tradition, "for a broadcast if you play musical chairs with the people on it every time the ratings go up or down."⁸⁸

Nevertheless, Sauter's efforts helped CBS News to move back into a decisive lead, 6 percent greater than ABC and 8 percent greater than NBC for the evening newscasts.⁸⁹

While the massive changes certainly helped to get the CBS Evening News back on the right track, there was one additional problem that Sauter had to tackle: the hard-driving image of Dan Rather, an image he had earned as a member of the "60 Minutes"

⁸⁴Janice Castro, "The battle in network news," Time, March 15, 1982, p. 52.

⁸⁵Tony Schwartz, "The tumult in TV news," New York Times, March 1, 1982, p. C15.

⁸⁶Johnson, "Bio: Van Gordon Sauter," p. 70.

⁸⁷Castro, "The battle in network news," p. 52.

⁸⁸Tony Schwartz, "Ratings and CBS News' Upheavals," New York Times, Dec. 17, 1981, p. C17.

⁸⁹Johnson, "Bio: Van Gordon Sauter," p. 68.

investigative team. The now-famous remedy was to have Rather wear sweaters while delivering the news. Strangely enough, this helped soften Rather's image by making him appear more casual.⁹⁰

IMAGE AND THE TV NEWSCASTER

Image, quite simply, is appearance, real or imagined. A person may not be incredibly intelligent, but may appear so and therefore achieve that image. A person may have athletic skill, such as Gerald Ford, who played football at the University of Michigan, but may come across as clumsy if, as in Ford's case, his few clumsy actions are publicized more frequently than his dexterity. In the deceptive world of television, images are easily distorted. Michael Novak, writing in National Review, explained such:

Television, as a visual act, is built upon illusions, illusions inherent in the working of the camera. To see something on camera is not to see it with the naked eye: the two perceptions are quite different. . . . Some quite admirable human beings do not "come across" on television. Some superficial and even unpleasant people are remarkably telegenic.⁹¹

On television, and specifically on television news, image can determine the success of a person or a show. Sally Quinn is a good example. A Washington Post reporter with no background in TV, Quinn became a morning news personality at CBS, "in part because CBS executives thought she was the kind of sexy personality who could bring viewers," to the morning news.⁹²

⁹⁰Castro, "The battle in network news," p. 52.

⁹¹Michael Novak, "The election of anchormen," National Review, Sept. 18, 1981, p. 1082.

⁹²Matusow, The Evening Stars, p. 182.

"Worse, the executives consciously tried to promote her as a kind of blonde bombshell who used sex to get her stories."⁹³ The result: "hostile letters from viewers poured in by the carload, and the critics tore her apart."⁹⁴ Quinn is no longer a television newscaster.

If image is appearance, appearance is image. The TV news personalities must soon "learn that a piece on nuclear holocaust will elicit two-dozen letters on their hairdo. They know that the 'vision' in television may come down to their looks."⁹⁵

The importance of appearance is accented by the recent Metromedia lawsuit of Christine Craft, a Kansas City anchorwoman demoted to an off-air position because she was, "too old, unattractive and not deferential enough to men."⁹⁶ Craft, who survived a workover as a platinum blonde with bright red lipstick, said that KMBC-TV's news director told her that the public wanted "young, pretty women" who deferred to men.⁹⁷ Needless to say, KMBC-TV's news ratings had dropped and research on Craft had shown that viewers preferred a younger, prettier woman, so she was demoted from her co-anchor position. Youth and beauty are prevalent among television anchorwomen. In a survey of 1200 anchorpersons, Audience Research and Development

⁹³ Matusow, The Evening Stars, p. 182. ⁹⁴ IBID,

⁹⁵ Ellen Goodman, "TV News still dropping anchors," Detroit News, Aug. 4, 1983, p. A14.

⁹⁶ William A. Henry III, "Requiem for TV's Gender Gap," Time, Aug. 22, 1983, p. 57.

⁹⁷ Patricia O'brien, "TV News: Film and Flash at 11," Detroit Free Press, Aug. 8, 1983, p. A17.

found that while half of the male anchors were over 40, only three percent of the women were 40 or older. Moreover, no women over 50 anchor any of the more than 1,000 newscasts in the United States.⁹⁸

With respect to appearance, examples of suggested changes in personal appearance, based on research, abound, especially for women. New York's NBC affiliate urged Mary Alice Williams to change her eye color with tinted contact lenses. ABC's San Francisco affiliate forbade Dorothy Reed from wearing her hair in corn rows.⁹⁹ Since it was difficult to determine the ethnicity of Charlene Mitchell over the television screen, the CBS affiliate in Washington D.C. suggested that she either learn Spanish to be perceived as Hispanic or that she wear an afro wig so that people would realize that she is black.¹⁰⁰ The emphasis on beauty is so strong that Ladies Home Journal actually used four newswomen in an article on fashion and beauty. Shown modelling the blouses that, "today can stand on their own--looking professional, totally feminine,"¹⁰¹ the beauty tips of these women follow:

Marlene Sanders: A good night's sleep is key. . . .I try to take a steam bath and get a massage whenever I can. . . .Avoid the "mannish" look in the office. There's no reason for a woman to wear tailored suits. . . .I do cover up any gray, but that's because I know that my

⁹⁸Mike Duffy, "Local TV newswomen weigh show-biz values," Detroit Free Press, Aug. 5, 1983, p. B2.

⁹⁹Henry III, "Requiem," p. 57.

¹⁰⁰George Bullard, "Researchers can come up with the darndest advice," Detroit News, Aug. 5, 1983, p. B2.

¹⁰¹Dorothy Ann Glasser, "Fashion Newsmakers," Ladies Home Journal, April, 1982, p. 72.

strawberry blonde hair is one of my best features.
Joan Lunden: If your hair goes limp, brush from the nape up and then grab from the roots and floff out with your fingertips. . . .I try to have a facial at least once a month.

Charlayne Hunter-Gault: It brings out my eyes when I shape my brows. I've also learned the value of contour creme for bringing out my cheekbones--especially since the camera adds ten pounds.

Jessica Savitch: Know your best features: Maximize the good ones, minimize the others. I have great cheekbones so I play them up. Eyes, hair, bone structure and complexion can all be emphasized to bring out your best look.¹⁰²

Clothing can be important in conveying an image as has been illustrated with the case of Dan Rather. "What works? Tailored suits for both men and women. Solids. Subtle tweeds. Traditional pinstrips. Dark colors. What doesn't? Plaids. Bold Stripes. Solid Blacks. Stark white. Frills. Flash."¹⁰³ WDIV-TV's Mort Crim believes that, "your clothing should be consistent with the kind of image that you try to project of yourself. In my case, it's authority. I have to give a visual impression of authority."¹⁰⁴ WKBD-TV's Joe Glover goes for "your basic conservative businessman look."¹⁰⁵ Clearly, the news is show business and the newscasters are its stars. As Van Gordon Sauter put it, "a show without a star is a failed show."¹⁰⁶

The recent death of Frank Reynolds was the death of such a star. Replacing him on ABC's "World News Tonight," was not

¹⁰² Glasser, "Fashion Newsmakers," pp. 132-133.

¹⁰³ Chuck Bennett, "Anchored to Style: How Newspeople Dress for the Tube," Detroit News, Feb. 8, 1981, p. C7.

¹⁰⁴IBID. ¹⁰⁵IBID.

¹⁰⁶ Tony Schwartz, "Why TV News Is Increasingly Being Packaged As Entertainment," New York Times, Oct. 17, 1982, p. B1.

an easy task. David Brinkley did not work out; the ratings slipped as viewers turned away. Ted Koppel failed to draw the viewers back. Besides, Koppel, himself a star on "Nightline," would also require a replacement. "Nightline" has good ratings and ABC was therefore reluctant to change stars. As of July 1, 1983, the only ratings increase came with Peter Jennings sitting in.¹⁰⁷ He became Reynolds's permanent successor.

Meanwhile at NBC, the pairing of Tom Brokaw and Roger Mudd did not succeed in bringing in the audience of the old Huntley-Brinkley team. Roger Mudd was subsequently dropped from the anchor desk and Brokaw became the sole anchor. John Reidy speculated that, "they may have done tests to show that Brokaw is a potential superstar and that this is the way to go, with one anchor."¹⁰⁸ Swift changes in personnel such as those described herein are common in the medium. Reuven Frank reported that, "there are more people (about 5,000) earning big money, sizeable incomes from analyzing the Nielsens than there are Nielsen families (1200)."¹⁰⁹ ABC executives Fred Pierce and Tony Thomopolous once even employed a seer to advise on programming decisions.¹¹⁰ As a result, "the average television journalist learns to live with the insecurity of the business."¹¹¹ This insecurity is present in local news as well. What's more, journalists are not the only personnel who need to worry; "so do local news producers. Not one of the three news directors

¹⁰⁷ Mike Duffy, "Network newsrooms play celebrity game," Detroit Free Press, July 31, 1983, p. C6. ¹⁰⁸IBID.

¹⁰⁹ Marvin Kittman, "Outpsyching the Nielsens," The New Leader, May 4, 1981, p. 22. ¹¹⁰IBID, p. 21.

¹¹¹ Goodman, "TV News still dropping anchors," p. A14.

for the local network-owned stations in New York City has been in his job more than two-and-a-half-years," Tony Schwartz reported in December, 1981.¹¹²

While job security in television news has become less certain, salaries for anchors have been steadily increasing. The reason for this is simple: "Popular anchors attract viewers to newscasts just as certain actors draw audiences to the films in which they appear."¹¹³ Ever since Roone Arledge gave Barbara Walters \$1 million to co-anchor the evening news and do entertainment specials (half coming from each budget), this has been the case.¹¹⁴ Most industry insiders blame Arledge for this trend. It was his offer of nearly \$2 million to Dan Rather that prompted CBS to move quickly to sign him¹¹⁵ to an \$8 million, five year contract.¹¹⁶ At NBC, Tom Brokaw's contract is estimated at \$1.5 million while Peter Jennings earns an estimated \$900,000 at ABC for their respective evening newscasts.¹¹⁷

Local salaries are also high. Connie Chung, while an anchor in Los Angeles, signed a contract at a reported \$600,000 a year while her current co-anchor on the NBC morning newscasts, Bill Kurtis, earned close to \$500,000 a year as a Chicago anchorman. In New York, Jim Jensen, Roger Grimsby and Chuck

¹¹²Schwartz, "When News Goes Show Biz," p. D23. ¹¹³IBID.

¹¹⁴Matusow, Evening Stars, p. 168. ¹¹⁵IBID.

¹¹⁶"The Million Dollar Anchor," Forbes, April 25, 1983, p. 14.

¹¹⁷"Television: Casting the Anchor," The Economist, Sept. 3, 1983, p. 24.

Scarborough earn similar salaries.¹¹⁸ In Boston, Tom Ellis was given a \$500,000 contract to jump from the ABC affiliate to the CBS affiliate. His co-anchor, Robin Young, was paid a similar salary. Win Baker, general manager of WNEV-TV, which hired Ellis, explained that, "Tom Ellis is the Reggie Jackson in this market and who wants the man who hits 30 home runs working for the other guy?"; he also noted that the station would earn two or three times its investment if WNEV-TV picked up even two points in the ratings as a result.¹¹⁹

AN OVERVIEW

To summarize, the profitability of news programming, on both the local and national levels, has subjected it to the same programming concerns of entertainment shows: high ratings. But, given the nature of news as a public service, these programs cannot be cancelled, so methods of adjusting the programs to the desires of the audiences they serve must be utilized. The methods utilized are often those suggested by news consultants who research audience desires and opinions concerning news programming. As a result of their recommendations, television news has become more entertainment-oriented. Flashy graphics, glamorous anchorwomen and handsome anchormen, a touch of humor, increased human interest stories and efforts to show community involvement and concern among newscasters are used extensively. Research on individuals often precedes changes in their appearance and approach to delivering the news; more often, poor ratings

¹¹⁸ Schwartz, "When News Goes Show Biz," p. D23.

¹¹⁹ Tony Schwartz, "Boston TV Stations Battling Over News Anchors," New York Times, August 30, 1983, p. C16.

result in a high turnover rate among both executives and on-air personalities. The newscaster who is perceived as a ratings booster is likely to be paid well; on the other hand, the turnover rate is often high when a station is trying to improve its news ratings, so the newscaster's position has become an insecure one.

It should be noted that these programming concerns do not supersede journalistic concerns as far as news coverage and presentation are concerned. Detroit News television columnist George Bullard explained the efforts of television news divisions as follows:

It's exactly as it is in a print newsroom. There's so much going into the flavor of a newscast in terms of the content--what plays first, what plays second, how much time is allocated--and each producer is fighting for time for the stories he believes in. For all the research and all the pretty faces you've got up front, you've got eight people you never see on the screen hacking it out. The first time I saw that, it gave me a new insight on TV news, that it wasn't just somebody saying, 'let's get sex up front tonight.'¹²⁰

It is not the purpose of this paper to evaluate the efforts of the news divisions in performing their daily duties of gathering , writing and editing their news programs. It would be unfair, however, to assume that these responsibilities are controlled by the programming concerns which form the basis for this thesis.

THE NEWS RACE IN DETROIT

Given television's oligopolistic nature, viewers are not given as much choice as might be desired; as a result, loyalties may be built and difficult to alter. Such is the

¹²⁰Taken from a personal interview with the author.

case in Detroit, where WXYZ-TV has a firm hold on first place.¹²¹ So when the May, 1981 Nielsen ratings showed WDIV-TV beginning to nudge out WJBK-TV for second place in the Detroit news market, officials at WJBK-TV began to worry.¹²² But when the October, 1981 ratings showed that WJBK-TV had lost 40 percent of its weekday afternoon news audience since the same period in 1980,¹²³ it became apparent that changes had to be made. After initial attempts to alter the station's news image failed, a new general manager/vice president, Bill Flynn, was brought in; a turnover rate similar to that of CBS under Van Gordon Sauter took place. It is the purpose of this thesis to analyze the Detroit market and the report the efforts made by WJBK-TV to improve its standing in the market.

BACKGROUND ASSUMPTIONS

It is assumed herein that:

1. WJBK-TV's poor ratings in 1981 were a reflection of the audience's dissatisfaction with the personnel and presentation utilized;
2. Storer Broadcasting sent Bill Flynn to WJBK-TV in the capacity of general manager/vice president for the primary purpose of improving the station's news ratings;
3. The changes made by Flynn in both executive and on-air positions were instituted for the purpose of improving the station's news ratings;
4. Consultant's advice was utilized in Flynn's decision-making process concerning individual newscasters;
5. The advertising rates in 1983 are greater than they were in 1981, and that these rates rise in accordance with ratings; and
6. The efforts made by WJBK-TV in its attempt to improve ratings are reflective of the programming efforts of the networks and other local affiliates as discussed herein.

However, these assumptions need to be tested.

¹²¹Jim McFarlin, "Movin' Up," Detroit News, June 10, 1981, p. B8. ¹²²IBID.

¹²³Ben Brown, "The fall of channel 2 news," Detroit News, November 9, 1981, p. B1.

RATIONALE

Research techniques applied to audiences and communicators are relatively uniform nationwide, so the methods examined herein have implications for markets other than Detroit as well. Insofar as the study is not only recent but an on-going process, the likelihood of the continuation of such practices is quite strong. An understanding of the methods utilized in the restructuring of WJEK-TV's news will therefore serve as a basis for understanding such changes as may occur here, or in other markets, in the future.

CHAPTER II

THE PROBLEM, DEFINITIONS OF TERMS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

THE PROBLEM

What are the influences of news programming techniques and news market conditions in Detroit on the restructuring of WJBK-TV news in relation to WDIV-TV and WXYZ-TV news operations?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The general purpose of the study is to analyze the news programming concerns and techniques utilized by WJBK-TV in the restructuring of its news programming in relation to Detroit news market conditions and news operations at WDIV-TV and WXYZ-TV. Specifically, it is the purpose of this study to:

1. Identify the Detroit television news market as analyzed by professionals in the medium or whose job it is to report on the medium;
2. Discuss positioning strategies of the two network affiliated stations and the one network-owned station in Detroit;
3. Discuss the news programming techniques as utilized in the Detroit market;
4. Report the influence of ratings on advertising sales in Detroit and as they relate to the stations' news operations;
5. Examine the impact of news and audience research as applied in the Detroit television news market;
6. Relate all of the above to the specific problems facing WJBK-TV in its efforts to improve its position in the Detroit television news race;
7. Delineate the changes made at WJBK-TV in its efforts to improve its position and the effect of

these changes on the ratings; and
8. Generate some conclusions and generalizations.

Material concerning WDIV-TV (channel 4, an NBC affiliate) and WXYZ-TV (channel 7, ABC owned) will be utilized primarily for comparative purposes. Since most of the movement during the time span covered in this thesis has taken place at WJBK-TV (channel 2, a CBS affiliate), the major emphasis will be on the efforts made therein to improve the news ratings.

CONCERNS OF THE STUDY

The research objectives raise the following questions:

1. What type of research was used at WJBK-TV in determining audience and its receptiveness to news programming at WJBK-TV?
2. How much weight does the management of WJBK-TV give to research findings?
3. What was the basis for the personnel changes which occurred at WJBK-TV between 1981 and 1983?
4. What has been the perceived effect of these changes on the ratings of the news programming at WJBK-TV?
5. Are on-air personalities aware of research concerning themselves?
6. What is the desired image for both individual newscasters and the news programming itself at WJBK-TV?
7. What methods were employed in the effort to achieve the desired news ratings?
8. What is the influence of advertising on a newscaster's acceptability? Does one type of advertising work better than another?
9. What is the influence of the ratings on advertising revenues in the Detroit area? Also, what is the influence of the ratings on the price salesmen can charge for advertising on news programming in the Detroit area?
10. To what degree are the practices employed by WJBK-TV News reflective of those employed nationally and at other stations in the Detroit market?

DEFINITIONS

A few working definitions are necessary for a common understanding of this thesis. Talent is used in the medium

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to describe on-air personalities; in this thesis, this word is used in reference to newscasters. Image is operationally defined as the apparent personality traits projected by one person (the newscaster) or one program (WJBK-TV evening news) to a mass audience. This image represents an audience's subjective knowledge of reality and may include such components as dynamism, movement and credibility. Credibility is defined as the believability of a person, a quality that breeds trust and respect. Audience is defined as those people reached or desired for a specific program during a specific period of time. Attitude is defined as a general disposition towards a subject while an opinion is a more specific expression of an attitude in a given context.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

METHOD

Qualitative content analysis of the beliefs and trends of the television medium in news programming nationally, in other localities and in the Detroit market was utilized. A macro approach was used in the examination of the overall programming concerns in Detroit and with specific reference to WJBK-TV. A micro approach was used in the examination of the reasons behind the individual changes which took place at WJBK-TV in its efforts to improve its position in the Detroit market.

In accomplishing these objectives, personal interviews were held with the following people: Bill Flynn, vice president

and general manager, WJBK-TV; Bob Warfield, news director, WDIV-TV; Bob Rowe, assistant news director, WXYZ-TV; Phil Dick, former director of research and marketing for Storer Broadcasting and WJBK-TV; George Bullard, Detroit News television columnist; Mike Duffy, Detroit Free Press television columnist; and Sonny Eliot, the weatherman whose dismissal from WJBK-TV was the cause of much bad publicity for Bill Flynn. In addition, Kathleen Collins, account executive at WXYZ-TV, Marla Drutz, marketing director at WJBK-TV and other sales personnel at all three stations examined in this thesis, were interviewed via telephone.

RUBRICS OF ANALYSIS

Two clear rubrics of analysis have surfaced in the course of this study: programming techniques and market conditions. It is therefore necessary to examine the specifics of each.

A. Programming Techniques

Since news programming represents the largest bulk of programming for most stations, its impact on overall station performance is of extreme importance. Programming concerns therefore focus on the improvement of news programming as is reflected in the ratings. Numerous techniques are therefore utilized to improve the news and hence, an individual station's performance. As a result, the study examines the importance of:

1. The news ratings to sales departments and news departments;
2. Research on audience perceptions and desires in news programming and the influence of such on the news programming strategies at WJBK-TV;
3. Image for news programming and for talent;

4. Demographics and psychographics of the audience;
5. Promotion in the development of image and audience acceptance of a given news program or news personality;
6. Adjacent programming, referred to as lead-in and lead-out, in providing an audience for a specific station's news programming and;
7. Entertainment in news presentation.

B. Market Structure

The above programming concerns represent concerns which all stations face. It is also important to examine the nature of the Detroit market relative to these concerns. As such, this study is also concerned with:

1. Size of the Detroit market;
2. Importance of the ratings relative to the number of viewers;
3. Importance of the ratings relative to revenues derived from news programming;
4. The profile of the Detroit viewership;
5. Salary structure for talent in Detroit;
6. The competitive structure of the Detroit television news market;
7. News marketing strategies utilized as a result of the Detroit market profile; and
8. Fan loyalty and its effects on news programming strategies in Detroit.

TIME FRAME FOR THE STUDY

While most of the personnel changes illustrated in this thesis took place at WJBK-TV between 1981 and 1983, the nature of television news in general and in Detroit specifically necessitates an examination of marketing conditions over a longer period of time. As a result, the thesis examines, in part, Detroit television news programming tendencies since 1976 in order to more fully illustrate the necessity for the changes in news programming at WJBK-TV.

SCHEME OF ANALYSIS

The primary scheme of analysis is in interpretation

and qualitative analysis of news, magazine and journal items as well as statements made during personal interviews with the author.

CHAPTER III

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

THE DETROIT TV NEWS MARKET

"Detroit: dubbed the motor city, the auto capital of the world. But it's so much more than cars. A lot of people around the country think Detroit is just a blue-collar town. In reality, it's a blue-chip town. So huge and diversified, it outranks and clearly outdistances such cities as Boston and San Francisco by a wide margin. Detroit: a hotbed of activity, a technological and commercial center, a focal point of industry and education, a pharmaceutical center, a major shipping port. Detroit: a melting pot of many cultures and one of the most lucrative and influential marketplaces in America."¹

The above quote, taken from a 1981 market sales presentation for WJBK-TV, is indicative of the pride the Detroit television stations show towards their community. It is also indicative of the diversified interests of the community which are so important to advertisers. The promotional tape continued to outline Detroit's interests: sports, theatre, culture, movies, boating, fireworks, fashion, business and industry are all depicted in detail, interspersed with shots of Greektown, the Renaissance Center, the Detroit River, Hart Plaza, the Strohs brewery and, frequently, the WJBK-TV studios. It concludes with a lengthy profile of the WJBK-TV news team, shown individually and on the set.

Phil Dick, who was the market research director at

¹Courtesy of Phil Dick.

WJBK-TV at the time of the presentation, explained why the final emphasis was placed on the news team. "News is considered the critical point of all stations and your news is your community identity," he said, "but it also relates to how many dollars one can extract from the market."²

Bill Flynn, current vice president and general manager at WJBK-TV, agrees. "News normally at any station is your best foot forward," he said, "not only with your image, but also to the advertisers; a great number of advertisers are convinced that if you're watching a news show, you're paying more attention to the set than if you're watching a comedy or drama. And it's a higher scale audience and it's upper educated."

Detroit is the seventh largest television market in the United States. According to Bob Rowe, assistant news director at WXYZ-TV, there are a potential four-and-a-half million people in the Detroit television audience at any given time. And this is most likely a conservative estimate. Kathleen Collins, account executive at WXYZ-TV, estimates that a single rating point can represent as many as 16,600 viewers.

A comparison of second quarter 1984 advertising rates will help illustrate the importance of a top-rated news show. A 30-second spot on the top-rated news show, at WXYZ-TV, runs \$1000 for the early newscasts (which run from 5 to 7 P.M.) and \$2400 for the late newscasts (from 11 to 11:30 P.M.). At WDIV-TV, the cost is \$700 on the early news (from 5:30 to 6:30 P.M.)

²Unless otherwise noted, all quoted material was taken from personal interviews with persons listed on pages 33 and 34 of this thesis.

and \$1750 at 11 P.M. At WJBK-TV, the cost is \$450 on the early news (from 5:30 to 6:30 P.M.) and \$1800 at 11 P.M. According to Collins, the 30-second spot accounts for 80 percent of television spot sales in Detroit.

Account executives are quick to point out that advertising sales are based largely on supply and demand, that second and fourth quarter rates are traditionally higher than first and third quarter rates and that spot prices will rise and fall in these quarters regardless of the ratings fluctuation in the market.

Phil Dick explained, however, that as the ratings for news programming rise, so does the demand. As the availability of space becomes scarce, the rates will rise. In this way, he explained that, "the higher the ratings for news, the higher the cost," for advertising space.

It is therefore worthwhile to compare the three Detroit stations' audience shares to their costs for advertising. With both Nielsen and Arbitron operating metered services in Detroit, and with most advertisers in the area basing their purchases on Arbitron figures, the figures used will be Arbitron.

In early news in February, the first quarter sweeps month, WXYZ-TV drew a 24 percent share of the audience compared to WDIV-TV's 23 percent share and WJBK-TV's 14 percent share. The advantage financially for WXYZ-TV is \$300 more than WDIV-TV and \$650 more than WJBK-TV. In late news, WXYZ-TV drew a 30 share, WJBK-TV drew a 25 share and WDIV-TV drew a 24 share. The financial advantage for WXYZ-TV

is \$600 over WJBK-TV and \$650 over WDIV-TV. The closeness in advertising prices for WDIV-TV and WJBK-TV in late news is almost certainly due to the fact that WJBK-TV has only recently been on the rise in its news programming efforts.

Bob Warfield, news director at WDIV-TV, said that a single ratings point in the Detroit market can represent as much as a million dollars in yearly revenue. And, since Arbitron began its Detroit metering system in September, 1983, ratings, and hence, advertising costs, have increased. Marla Drutz, WJBK-TV marketing director, explained that, "rating equals audience share multiplied by your HUT (houses using television) level." Before changing to the metered service, ratings reflected the viewing patterns as reported in diaries. "While only about 50 percent would indicate that they were watching news in their diaries, meters proved this to be a low estimate. As a result, the HUT level increased and, consequently, the ratings increased. For this reason, in the sales department, audience share is a more important gauge of our success than the rating itself." Indeed, the HUT level for the February, 1984 shares outlined earlier was at 58 percent. With the larger projected audience, all three stations were able to increase their costs for a 30-second spot.

Warfield explained that the ratings have a different meaning to the news department than they do to the sales department. "It makes sense that if you work as hard as we do to create a product that's compelling and informative, you want people watching it and so you therefore want ratings. You don't want ratings just for ratings; that doesn't mean

anything. You want people watching for a substantive reason. To a sales department, they mean more revenues and it's separate from what we want them for. The twain should never meet."

Understanding the market is therefore a necessity, though it is not necessarily an easy task. It is for this reason that Warfield does not believe in bringing in researchers. "You can't fly in here in two weeks and do a project and assess the marketplace and fly out, leaving me a document telling me how to run my programming. I've been here four years and I'm still trying to figure out the market."

Bill Flynn describes Detroit as a macho market which, while geographically large, holds the attitudes of a small town. "They don't like outsiders; they don't like change. The almost hero-worship they seem to have for sport figures and people in the media business is unusual. Every other city I've been in--in Boston, Atlanta or New Orleans-- they couldn't really care less when you change on-air talent. People come and go in our business; it's a very common thing. Yet here, they're slow to accept outsiders. They're just now beginning to accept Mort Crim--to believe that maybe he does live here--and that's after six years."

Flynn's description is undoubtedly influenced by the bad publicity he received over the changing of talent which took place at WJBK-TV under his direction. Nevertheless, evidence supports his analysis, as shall be shown later in this thesis.

As was illustrated in the market sales demonstration presented earlier, Detroiters are people who love to be

entertained. It should therefore come as no surprise that each station's newscast has its degree of entertaining material. "It's a way of pacing the newscast," Bob Rowe said. "With a newspaper, people can pick and choose. It's not like that with television, so we try to pace it. We maybe do four or five minutes of entertainment in an hour's news."

As Bill Flynn sees it, "you buy that box to be entertained. You don't buy it to be educated. What you really want is to inform as well as entertain. Dan Rather is going to give the world news in 22 minutes. At the end, you'll notice a kicker, or light fluff, so you walk away with a smile. So we have to deal in headlines."

Rowe explained that "happy talk," as it was originally used, was far more clownish than what has been tagged as happy talk today. Today, he said, happy talk is primarily used when introducing sports or weather.

Detroit News television columnist George Bullard found examples of light material in each of Detroit's three network-affiliated news shows on March 26, 1984, "with the closing of the newscasts, as usual, providing the most creatively humorous moments."³ The examples follow:

Kathy Adams wound down one Channel 2 (WJBK-TV) show with a light piece on saving rhinoceroses from slaughter because men believe "ground up rhinoceros horn can be used as an aphrodisiac."
 "You mean it isn't?" quipped co-anchor Sells.
 Channel 7's (WXYZ-TV) Bonds had some fun with a Harvard professor who's monitoring 100,000 radio frequencies for messages from outer space.

³George Bullard, "Underneath the Flash," Detroit News, April 1, 1984, p. E6.

And over at Channel 4 (WDIV-TV), after a story on a taxi service for animals, Mort Crim suggested that the company was practicing taxidermy. "Oh, stuff it," responded co-anchor Carmen Harlan. Now that's funny.⁴

In addition to the entertainment aspects of television news, the Detroit stations employ flashy graphics as well. "They just tend towards the visual stories because that's their medium," George Bullard said.

According to Bill Flynn, "there's an explosion going on in the electronic industry at all levels, including television, brought about by the computers and so forth. You see ABC in particular introduced some graphic techniques in Sarajevo that are a step ahead of the competition. So the use of the visual is always important to us, whether you're selling a car or whatever."

Few, including those included in this study, would disagree that news is packaged and sold as a commodity, just as the cars Flynn mentioned are packaged and sold. Phil Dick explained that this is done because news is, "their identity, their hallmark in the industry and their position in the community they serve." As far as advertisements are concerned, "it's the difference between getting a local retailer with one outlet on your news and having a large percentage of it sold out to the prestigious accounts, such as Cadillac dealers. It's sold as an upscale vehicle."

Moreover, the 11 P.M. audience is even more educated and generally has a higher income than the audience for the early

⁴George Bullard, "Underneath the Flash," Detroit News, April 1, 1984, p. E6.

news, which makes it even more of an upscale vehicle. Dick explained that much of the Detroit audience is blue-collar, which often means that they work a "nine-to-five" shift. These people are therefore not as likely to be watching the late news as they are the early news. "People in management are more likely to be able to watch the news at 11 P.M. than those who must get up early in the morning," he said.

Bill Flynn noted that talent is very high priced in Detroit. "There's an unrealism about the level of talent pricing in this market; there's no question about that," he said. Comparing Detroit to Cleveland, the ninth largest television market in the United States, Flynn estimated that salaries for talent are probably twice as high as those in Cleveland.

Though no one would give specific salaries of individual newscasters in their employment, Bob Warfield gave a general analysis of talent pricing at WDIV-TV. "The range runs anywhere from \$30,000 a year for a reporter to in excess of \$300,000 a year for a weighted anchor. But you won't have many \$300,000 salaries."

Warfield is quick to point out that the anchormen are generally worth their salaries. "That \$300,000 that they make is suddenly not so big when they're worth a million dollars a point, which is what an 11 p.m. rating point is worth in Detroit. So when you get someone like a Bill Bonds who is outstanding at propelling an audience, you hold onto him for all that he's worth."

In addition to the cost of talent, Mike Duffy estimates that promotion costs run hundreds of thousands of dollars at each station. As Sonny Eliot, former WDIV-TV and WJBK-TV weatherman, said, "promotion is the lifeblood of this industry."

As far as the cost of news coverage is concerned, Bob Rowe indicated that, as a ball-park figure, "it can get to the point where it's a quarter of a million dollars for one crew just in equipment."

Quite a large sum is also spent on research, though television management will not indicate how much. Phil Dick explained that WXYZ-TV has more research capabilities than the rest of the market put together. "They have a huge department for sales, retail, programming news and marketing position. They've got the money too," he said.

Though all stations use some degree of research, they rarely let any of it out to the public. As Flynn put it, to release certain types of research, "could just destroy some people." On the other hand, Dick pointed out that it would not be in the best interests of a station to release positive research to the individual researched. "If research showed that Murray Feldman was the top news personality in the area and he was aware of it, he could come at you with a gun during contract negotiations."

Most important to everyone interviewed for this study, the television news business is competitive and nobody wants to release information to their competition.

This has created an additional problem for reporters

in the Detroit print medium. Rowe, Flynn and Warfield all admitted that they don't always tell the reporters everything they want to know. At the same time, Rowe said, much of what the newspapers print about television news is not very factual because you're getting people writing it in columns like, "Yours Truly," which is a gossip column; it's labeled as such. People take it as news because it's in the newspaper. But the newspaper doesn't even say that it is factual and it's written as gossip. The television columnists try to do a pretty good job, but sometimes their facts are screwed up because we don't tell them things. Gibbell's doesn't tell Macy's what it's doing. We're not in this for fun. This is a business."

Flynn uses stronger words when describing flaws in the Detroit newspaper coverage of television news.

"Go back to what I said about Detroit being different. The hero-worship they have here of people in the television medium causes a problem. So the two papers, fighting for their very existence and both losing their shirts, have gotten into the gossip business, whether it be Kirk Gibson or Lee Thornton, with no thought of what they're doing to the person in the process and often not concerned with truth in the process--ie., Duffy printing in his column that insiders at the station say that Bonds has either a drug or an alcohol problem. That's not journalism; it's just cheap.

The reference to Bonds concerns his absence from the Detroit market during February of 1984. Station officials at WXYZ-TV let out no information as to where Bonds was or what happened to him. It was disclosed upon Bonds's return that he was being treated for leg pains.

Again, however, Flynn's attitude towards the Detroit

newspapers reporters is almost certainly a result of the reaction of loyal Detroit fans to some of the people he removed from WJBK-TV's news. Besides, newspaper accounts of television news, as evidenced by Bullard's account of happy talk used earlier, are not always flattering.

Demographics and psychographics of viewing audiences are also important in Detroit. Phil Dick explains:

Say we're a station that has a target of 18-49 for news, we're going to try to do research on them and if they're real happy, we're real happy. But if we put in our 25 to 50-plus group and they were happier than the 18 to 49, suddenly we're in trouble. We don't want the 50-plus group.

Dick explained how research was handled when he was at WJBK-TV:

We would take an outside source, say someone from California, and we'd bring them in and play tapes to focus groups. We'd have them look at our people mixed in with other people; we didn't tell them who they were looking for. Then we may send the tapes down to Dallas, Texas, to a place we kiddingly call "Shock Theatre." It's a theatre that people go into and it may show them a couple of movies, some commercials and suddenly, your newsperson is in there. The seats are wired and they register the electric energy impulses that a person gives off. If they sweat more, they perceive them as sexy, etc.

Dick added that a single study may show that a person who is brave, trustworthy and loyal may watch WJBK-TV news and that these same people, "are also big in buying blenders or on taking American Airlines. It gets pretty refined."

As far as how much emphasis is placed on the research once it is completed, Dick mentioned two problems: first, the data is often so concise that no one at the station can interpret

it; secondly, there is often a father-son type relationship between management and talent. "It's as if I told you your son looks good but he's a brat. Wouldn't that hurt your feelings?"

Often, Dick said, the result is that no action is taken on research findings. "Many times, studies of \$50,000 to \$60,000 result in no action. I've worked on two or three studies where that happened."

Perception, feelings and intuition should be used extensively, Dick said. "The very best research comes from gut feeling; there's never been anything built that can compete with that. There are people who know they're in trouble. They perceive what tomorrow is. We all have it and we have to listen to ourselves before we go out and spend \$50,000 or \$100,000 for research. The same is true of a program director."

Likewise, when a station is in trouble, it is usually quite apparent to those who run it. It is reflected in the ratings; it is reflected in audience share; and it is reflected in advertising revenues. It is also usually reflected in gains at another station. All of these aspects are linked together.

For a better understanding of the situation in Detroit, it is time to examine each commercial television station individually.

The charts on pages 49 and 50 will be used in the analysis of each station's audience share.

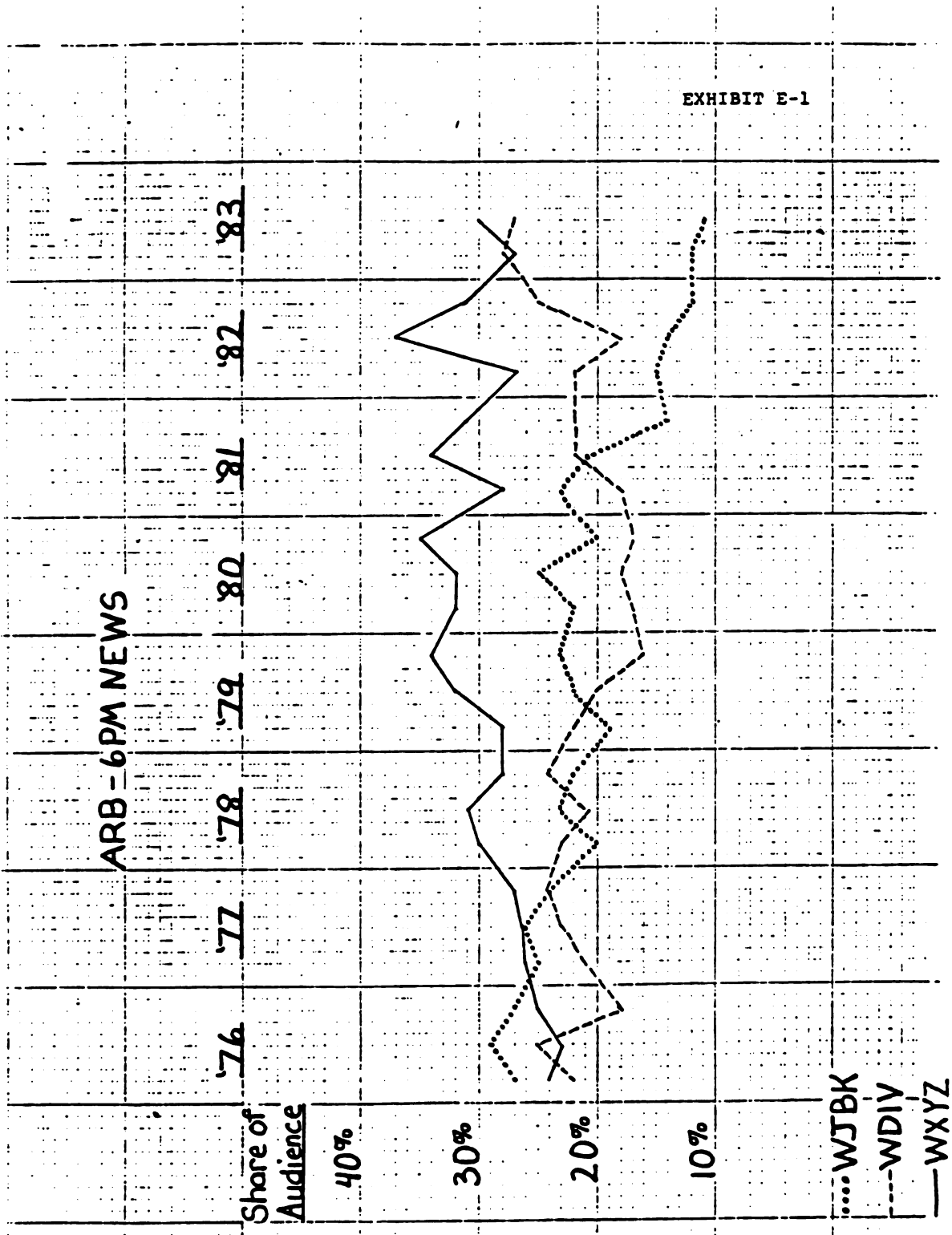
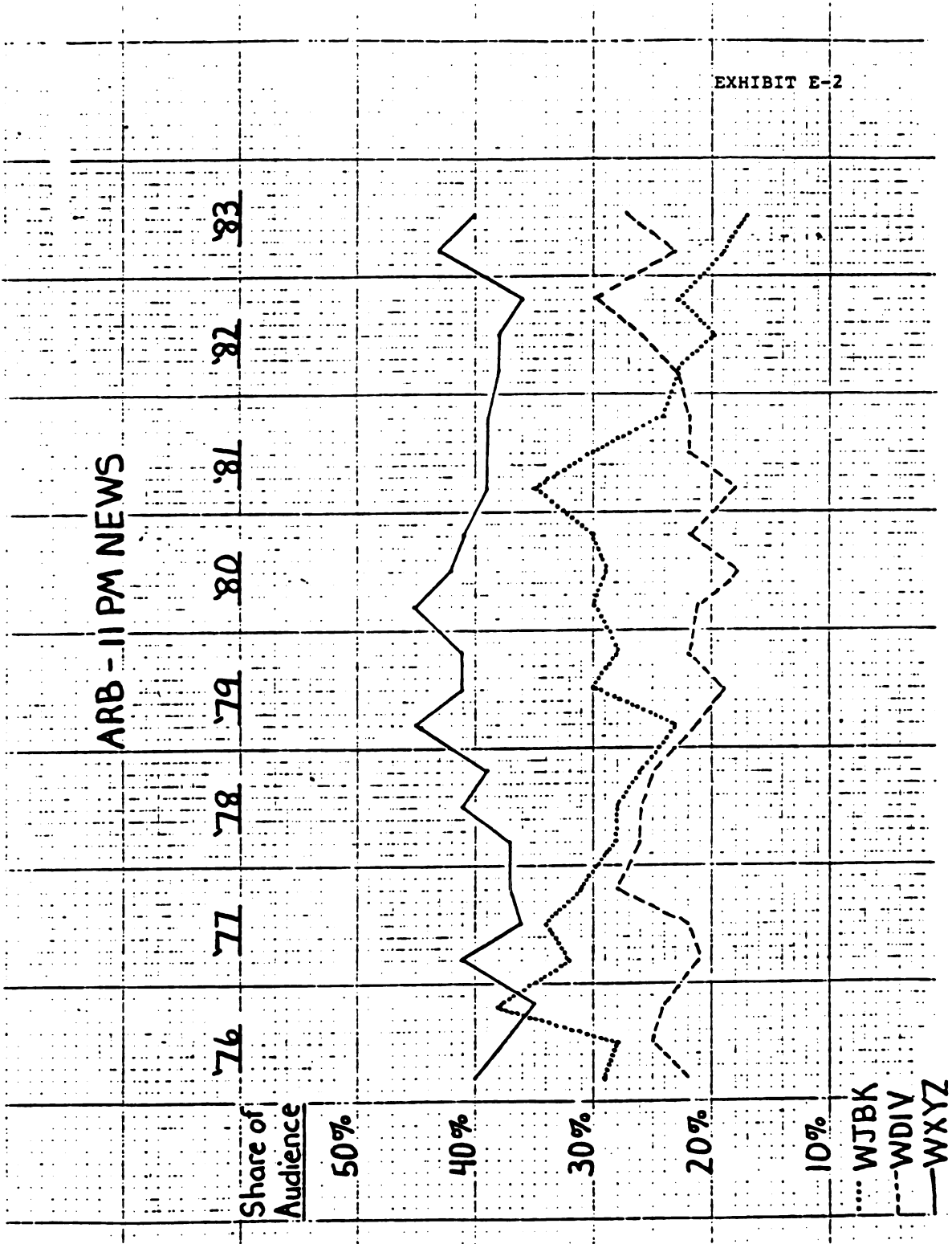


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THE SITUATION AT WXYZ-TV

One glance at the charts on pages 49 and 50 is all it should take to illustrate the dominant position of WXYZ-TV in Detroit television news programming. Since 1977, the station has been number one in the market and for most of this period, it has been no contest.

Bob Rowe explained that, as a result of the station's success with its news programming, it has been able to produce more local programming than any other local station in the country. "We do five hours and forty-five minutes of live, local programming every day," he said. This includes two shows which are hosted by John Kelly and Marilyn Turner, whose popularity made it possible to leave their respective positions as news anchor and weatherperson at WXYZ-TV to host the shows. "Kelly and Company," airs from 9 to 10:30 A.M. while, "Good Afternoon Detroit," which Rowe proudly announced is the, "strongest locally-produced show in the country," airs from 4 to 5 p.m. Moreover, "Good Afternoon Detroit," is followed by two hours of local news. The ABC News is shown at 7 P.M.

The strength of WXYZ-TV's local programming provides a solid lead-in to the early news. And, as an ABC owned station, the network's offerings provide a solid lead-in to the 11 P.M. newscast.

Though the reasons leading to this dominance are varied, everyone interviewed for this thesis agreed on the main element: anchorman Bill Bonds. "Our other anchors, we feel, have the same advantage of talents," Rowe said, "but

there's no question that Bill is the anchorman in Detroit simply because of the way the audience can relate to him." Phil Dick explained that, "Bonds is a Detroiter, no matter what he does. He'll always have that mystique about him and he's smart enough to tell you once in a while--in case a new audience is coming in--where he came from. That's good promotion."

It's difficult to watch WXYZ-TV very long without coming across a story that illustrates Bonds's similarity to his audience. On April 5, 1984, for example, Bonds preceded a commercial in a latter portion of the 5:30 newscast with the announcement of an upcoming story on, "a woman who was fired for doing too good of a job." When the news resumed, he told the story of an operator with 16 years experience with Michigan Bell Telephone Co. who was fired because she spent more than the allotted time, 30 seconds, giving information to individuals, a service which, Bonds added, she felt a moral obligation to extend beyond the limit to the elderly or to the particularly confused. He concluded the story by reading the company's final statement on the employee: "Unsatisfactory performance; employee terminated."

Everyone can relate to the unfairness of Bell's actions. For one thing, the telephone company is not generally the people's favorite. At the same time, it's easy to feel empathy for the woman's situation.

Phil Dick conveyed a Bonds story which he felt was one of the greatest promotions he ever heard. It concerned the Michigan State-Indiana State NCAA finals of 1979, a game

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won by Michigan State. Bonds's story, however, had an interesting angle to it.

He started off his story saying, "They gathered around the buses; they cheered; they went wild. Grandmothers who knew nothing about basketball a few months ago found themselves caught up in the excitement and kids tried to emulate him off the bus stop corner with their own basketballs. And," he said, "that's the way it was in Indiana today when Larry Bird came home."

What he said was, this guy is not a loser, this town is not a loser and this team is great.

Dick added that what made this story great was that Bonds took the loser's viewpoint. "There are too few winners, but losing is something we can all relate to and he took full advantage of it."

Bill Flynn is impressed with Bonds as well. "A great deal of our market is blue-collar and that's Billy and he plays it very well," he said. "He pulls the whole place over there with him, not that they don't have a good newscast, because they do. They have a lot of good people over there, but Bill orchestrates it."

Rowe is quick to point out that Bonds alone could not draw the audience without a solid backup system. "You've got to have an organization putting that material together, gathering the news, writing the news, and presenting the news that is really strong. He's got to have an organization behind him or the anchorman is nothing."

Phil Dick agrees that WXYZ-TV has a solid organization. "Jeanne Findlater is a good manager," he said. She hires good management and she listens to them. If they have an accident, she goes to find them at three in the morning. The general

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public doesn't know that, but they get the feeling that she does. So right off the top, they look good, like they belong here, like they're a part of you. We're now even beginning to perceive Rich Fisher (weekend anchor) as a local boy when he's not. Diana Lewis (Bonds's co-anchor) is definitely a part of this community. She's a girl scout leader, she lives in a suburban neighborhood and she's active in that neighborhood. She's allowed to be herself. Jerry Hodak (weather) is the same way. He's the Polish boy who grew up in Detroit. They just have it and it works."

According to Bob Rowe, the station never worked on an image; rather, he said, it came about as a result of what they do, "and what we do is to be as journalistically sound as possible." Nevertheless, WXYZ-TV has the image as the people's station, a "we're you and you're us," kind of image, as Phil Dick put it.

"It is important to note," Rowe said, "that channel 7 didn't spring up 25 years ago and become instantly number one. It took some time and a few different anchors to get it going."

THE SITUATION AT WDIV-TV

The charts on pages 49 and 50 illustrate the situation at WDIV-TV in news programming. The station was clearly trailing both WXYZ-TV and WJBK-TV till upward movement began to show itself in late 1981. The station, like WXYZ-TV, tried a variety of anchors before settling on its current lineup. As WWJ-TV, the station had the lowest

rated news programming when Post-Newsweek purchased it in 1978. Numerous changes, including the station's call letters followed. Bob Warfield explained the situation:

What we went through from 1978 to now is a turnover because we bought a station that was a number four station in a three-station market. So apparently, with respect to the product that was on the air, the public was saying, "we don't like that." The station therefore had no ratings; therefore it was making no money.

And so the turnovers came. With the new ownership came new management and new on-air talent. Anchors Lowell James, Sande Drew, David Wittman, John Blunt, Ben Frazier and Andrea Joyce all did stints on the early and late evening weekday newscasts (though not all of them were removed from the newscasts by the station) before the station settled on its current lineup. In the process, Mort Crim, who now co-anchors all of WDIV-TV's early and late evening weekday news shows, was brought in and paid an estimated \$200,000.⁵ Al Ackerman was lured back to WDIV-TV (where he had done sports for many years before moving to WXYZ-TV). Sonny Eliot, who had been with the station 32 years, took a position at WJBK-TV and thereby avoided the possibility of being fired.

Warfield said that the station does use research, "but we do it a little bit differently. Research comes in two forms: one, raw data, in terms of what's out there, what people are saying, what they're thinking and how they're

⁵Susan Slobojan, "Channel 4 realigns anchor teams," Detroit News, April 7, 1979, p. A16.

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reacting to it; and the other part comes in terms of recommendations. We don't use research consultants to recommend. Research is only a tool."

Warfield explained what WDIV-TV considers important in the research data it uses. "If a person is a front-liner, you're really looking to see if they have enough impact on the audience to be recognized. Name recognition, face recognition, and how they feel about them is important. Do they see them as nice, warm, friendly human beings they want to get their news from?"

As far as the talent changes WDIV-TV undertook in establishing a new market position, Warfield indicated that most of them, "were done on gut and track record--what they had done elsewhere--of news directors and executive producers." He emphasized that cosmetic appeal had nothing to do with it. "It's no, 'this is the kind of person I **want**: tall, blonde, blue-eyed and does this kind of story."

It took awhile, but by mid-1981, as indicated on the charts on pages 49 and 50, WDIV-TV's news had taken over second place in the Detroit market. Moreover, its early evening newscast, as illustrated on page 49, had an increased audience share of nearly 30 percent over November, 1980.⁶

With the new WDIV-TV news team in place and the ratings on the rise, Jim Snyder left for Post-Newsweek's Washington bureau and Warfield, his assistant news director, replaced him. Warfield and Snyder both admitted at the time that

⁶Susan Slobojan, "Jim Snyder leaves WDIV-TV," Detroit News, November 25, 1981, p. B5.

the upswing in news audience did influence the timing of the change.⁷

Warfield admitted that he did feel lucky in taking over a news division that was on the rise, but given the fickle nature of the industry, Warfield would not have lasted if he did not continue the upward mobility. As is evidenced by the charts on pages 49 and 50, WDIV-TV did continue to rise and has held second place in the Detroit market since mid-1981 in early evening and since early 1982 in late evening audience shares. And that's with the NBC network as the lowest rated lead-in for the late news.

The strength of Mort Crim certainly had something to do with the gain in audience as he was able to overcome a particularly bad promotional campaign when he came to the station in 1978. Mike Duffy wrote that the station, "introduced him to Detroit with look-at-us, chest-thumping overkill. The tone of the promotional spots indicated the motor city was about to be blessed with the world's greatest journalist."⁸ Crim, to his credit, overcame the promotion.

Promotion is credited with aiding in the station's news recovery, however. The "newskids" spots, which depicted the news team members as youths clearly bound for their future professions, the "Go for It" campaign, which became so popular that the station held a contest for a Detroit area vocalist

⁷Susan Slobojan, "Jim Snyder leaves WDIV-TV," Detroit News, November 25, 1981, p. B5.

⁸Mike Duffy, "This meat and potatoes city won't swallow TV megahype," Detroit Free Press, August 22, 1983, p. C3.

to sing the theme song, and the public service announcement about cystic fibrosis, which featured Jennifer Moore urging people to kiss their babies to be sure they don't taste excessively salty, all helped build an image for the news team and the station.⁹

At the same time, WDIV-TV developed a strong lead-in for its early news by delivering a solid line-up of successful syndicated shows: "The Jeffersons," at 4 P.M.; "All in the Family," at 4:30; and "Barney Miller," at 5 P.M.

With respect to WDIV-TV's news approach, emphasis is placed on journalistic commitment and authority. "Mort Crim is definitely a national-type news person," Phil Dick observed. "Even their weather is done on the highest authority. The most qualified: that's the way they're building their news."

Warfield said that WDIV-TV wants to have an impact on the industry. "We cover Detroit very well," he said, "but we also took you to El Salvador. We took you to the Middle East. We took you to Poland. We have the only live Lansing bureau in the marketplace, the only Washington bureau in the marketplace. We're talking about a station that is prepared to cover the city, the state and the nation. That's a journalistic commitment unmatched by anyone in town."

Warfield summarized WDIV-TV's situation as follows:

What we had to do was to put together a product that

⁹Mike Duffy, "This meat and potatoes city won't swallow TV megahype," Detroit Free Press, August 22, 1983, p. C3.

people would watch, that would in turn give us ratings, that would in turn allow us to make money, that in turn allows us to go to a \$14 million structure in downtown Detroit--the only station located in the city itself. So a lot of that money we turn around and invest in the community that has given to us in terms of responding to a product that we put on the air.

Warfield said that the station's goal is to overtake WXYZ-TV as the top news show in the Detroit market. "Our job is to position ourselves," he said. "We can't do it alone. They've got to make some mistakes. They will. They can't stay on top forever. Our job is to be in a position to take over when the opportunity arrives."

THE SITUATION AT WJBK-TV

As the charts on pages 49 and 50 indicate, WJBK-TV has been having difficulties since 1975 and, after a small period of growth between 1979 and 1981, the slide became rather drastic by the end of 1981.

To fully understand the problems facing WJBK-TV in its news programming, one really needs to go back about ten years, before the periods indicated on the charts, to the time when WXYZ-TV was involved in the anchorman search described by Bob Rowe. Phil Dick explained the situation:

We're talking about a station that was number one for 12 years in a row. Nationally, it was the most powerful television news operation in the country and all of a sudden, it started changing and talent started changing. When the evolution of talent took place, WXYZ-TV had decided, 'if you can't beat them, eat them, and so they did. Jack Mc Carthey was the first one. They found out how easy it was to do it so they decided to go after John Kelly. They just bought them off, piece-by-piece, deluding the product to a point where they didn't have to worry about it.

In addition to McCarthey and Kelly, Jac LeGoff,

Marilyn Turner and Jerry Hodak all moved over to WXYZ-TV. In addition, WDIV-TV (then WWJ-TV) lured away Tom Green, the station's Lansing reporter. "We were the innovators of the Lansing bureau and the Wayne County bureau," Dick said, but now we no longer had the expertise and depth in Lansing to make us a viable source of information as to what the local and state government was doing." The Wayne County bureau folded as a result, he added.

Dick admitted that WXYZ-TV was already closing in on WJBK-TV at the time, but added that the station was not prepared for the loss of so many top newscasters. They basically lost all of their front-line people and WJBK-TV, which had been positioned as the community-oriented station in Detroit, suddenly found itself starting over in the development of news programming.

Since the problem was news, the station brought in Bob McBride as vice president and general manager as McBride's background was in news. But, Dick said, he didn't belong as general manager. "We should have kept him as news director and paid him a million dollars," he said.

McBride's problem was one of communication, Dick said. "He's up there and he hires a young guy who's not a major decision-maker and can't make a change without going to McBride. So it was like a rubber band that gets stretched out. By the time the messenger gets up there, the king is so happy to see the messenger that the message is forgotten."

In addition to the communication problem, there was

a problem with the image of WJBK-TV's anchorman, Joe Glover, who began anchoring the news with Harry Gallagher in 1975. "Glover looked good and sounded good but there was no mystique or depth to him. That's the way the audience perceived him," Dick said.

It was decided that Glover had to gain more community involvement, Dick said, "so we got him involved in MDA (Muscular Dystrophy Association). Once he got involved, he really cared. He had a sincere desire to help people and he really loved kids. When the guy cried, he really cried. So we brought him up as soft, someone who could relate to problems. That brought up his image further and also brought up the ratings."

Glover's efforts for MDA proved successful in Detroit, so much so that a clip of Jerry Lewis, taken from the telethon, was used in a 1978 market sales presentation. "I want you to hear something terrific," Lewis said. "A station in Detroit, WJBK-TV," has a total now of, "\$300,000 more than last year. Their total is \$1,128,000," he said, adding with emphasis, "in Detroit!"¹⁰

Glover, as WJBK-TV's anchorman, narrated the presentation which did its best to position WJBK-TV as the community-oriented station by showing how well it understood the Detroit market:

What kind of market is Detroit? A strong one, almost two million in the Detroit area alone and almost six million in the TV-2 signal coverage area with an average per capita income that ranks it in the top 20 cities in the United States. Our standard of living is high; we

¹⁰Courtesy of Phil Dick.

own more homes, more cars, more recreational vehicles than any other American city. We invest, we buy and we travel. We entertain and we love to be entertained. WJBK-TV 2, soon to celebrate 30 years of broadcasting excellence, is a driving force in Detroit. TV-2 serves its six million Detroit and Canadian viewers as the community-oriented station.

The promo went on to list Mike Douglas as a strong lead-in for the early news and "America Tonight," as a strong lead-out from the 11 P.M. news. The news department is represented by Glover, shown with one evening's lead story. It concerned a chemical which was stolen from a truck in the WJBK-TV viewing area which could be fatal if inhaled or swallowed or could explode if dropped.

The obvious importance of the news portion was to show the value WJBK-TV places on community safety. Not only do they report a potentially dangerous story in their viewing area, they lead with it. Never mind for the moment that the other stations most likely did the same thing. It showed the concern of the station and, when combined with the MDA portions of the tape which show an emotional, nearly tearful Joe Glover with a victim of the disease, clearly depicted the community concern of WJBK-TV.

"We had an excellent sales department," Dick said. "We continued to sell the product long after the product was gone."

So when WDIV-TV was on the rise, WJBK-TV was on the decline, so much so that in November, 1981, WJBK-TV's afternoon newscast had lost 40 percent of its audience since the previous November. Ben Brown, Detroit News television

columnist at the time, tried to analyze the reasons for the station's decline. Portions of the analysis follow:

I believe Channel 2's worries extend beyond the problem of strong competition. I think people are deserting Channel 2 as much as they're being attracted to Channel 4. And it's not hard to see why

For the first four days of last week, I watched Channel 2's Eyewitness News to see how it would change my life. That's what the station promised in print ads promoting its, "Surviving the 80's" news segments. What it delivered were a few obvious observations about the economy coupled with consumer hints that could have been drawn from an old Reader's Digest. It wasn't the advertising hype which surprised me; I'm used to that. What really got to me was the air of helplessness which radiated from the Channel 2 news hour. And the most obvious problem is the hardest to correct--without, that is, lopping off a few heads.

The anchor people don't seem to have the slightest idea what they're saying. They just smile those inane smiles as they plod through badly-written copy and stumble over one silly transition after another.¹¹

Following the November ratings period, news director Mike Von Ende's new live, 90-minute format, called, "Live at Five," premiered, establishing Joe Glover as a single anchor from 5 to 6 P.M. Beverly Payne Draper and Roy Weissinger were the 6 P.M. news team and Robbie Timmons, who had co-anchored the 5:30 and 11 P.M. shows, was left with the 11 P.M. show only.

But "Live at Five" never really took off and when February, 1982 ratings showed that WJBK-TV had dropped seven share points in early news, which was already doing poorly, and 12 share points in the evening news, it was time to make some serious changes.

¹¹Ben Brown, "The fall of Channel 2 news," Detroit News, November 9, 1981, p. B1.

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Research showed that the show was being perceived as "folksy," or lightweight. Though Glover's soft image undoubtedly contributed to this image, it was Robbie Timmons who was to be saddled with most of the blame. Bob McBride, who thought that the lightweight image of Robbie Timmons was unfair, nevertheless acknowledged that it was a problem. "We did receive hundreds of complaints about Robbie's giggles and light-weightedness," he said at the time.¹²

Noting that it was time, "to field a better team," McBride announced that Timmons "got bumped for another team member."¹³

Phil Dick believes that Timmons would have made it as a top anchor at WJBK-TV, but that she was never properly promoted. "Her homeyness-type personality and her age set her as perfect demographic-wise with what was happening in the market. The post-war baby-boom was coming on , she was a part of it, she could relate, she's a good reporter, but she's that pretty, homey-type person. But they didn't take advantage of that. They were still looking at that 18 to 49."

Timmons didn't stay unemployed long. WXYZ-TV picked her up within a week of her departure from WJBK-TV. Though many industry insiders thought it was a ploy intended to boost WXYZ-TV's ratings during the February, 1982 sweeps, Timmons remains at WXYZ-TV today, doing weekend news, spot reporting and filling in for front-liners during the week.

¹²Ben Brown, "Timmons' Travels," Detroit News, Jan 17, 1982, p. G4. ¹³IBID., p. G1.

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WJBK-TV wasted no time in introducing the Detroit audience to Timmons's replacement, Lee Thornton. Unfortunately for Thornton, the station over-promoted her with an advertising campaign that highlighted her journalistic background, her education (Ph.D.) and her Washington experience. As stated earlier, Detroit is a market that is reluctant to accept outsiders and here was Lee Thornton, an outsider promoted as an absolute authority.

Phil Dick explained that, given the reluctance of Detroiters to accept outsiders readily, "Lee Thornton didn't belong in the market anyway. There were other people on our own staff who could've done the news. There were other local people who were established in the market who could've done our news. There were people who had been in this market that were in Flint or at ESPN that we could've welcomed back."

As Bill Flynn put it, "her own mother couldn't have lived up to the campaign. It wasn't her fault. Some guy from eastern Pennsylvania decided that this was the way to introduce her to the Detroit market. It was a tragedy."

So when Storer Broadcasting sent Bill Flynn to WJBK-TV as a replacement for McBride in April, 1982, one of his first problems was Lee Thornton, who had become so nervous that it was evident on the air. And so, Flynn said, it was a mutual agreement to let Thornton out of her contract. By the end of June, 1982, she had resigned.

Phil Dick resigned from WJBK-TV before Flynn arrived. He explained that he did so because he couldn't stand to see

his friends lose their jobs. "I had known Flynn for 22 years and I knew his history. I knew he wouldn't get rid of my friends, but he would do the right thing; he would get rid of management which was incompetent and incapable of running the station, but who he replaced them with scared me because if he had the axe, then they had the knives."

Dick was correct in his analysis of what would be the Flynn strategy. "I knew pretty well before coming here what had to be done," Flynn said. "You don't have a department going downhill if the department head is doing a good job. So several of the changes we made were not publicized at all because people couldn't care less if I changed news directors or program managers or sales managers or assistant general managers--all of which I did."

Flynn's first major change was in management; John Howell was brought in from Fresno, California, to replace news director Mike Von Ende. Though Fresno ranks as the nation's 77th largest market, Flynn brought Howell in, "because he was very good at what he was doing. I don't care where he was. His background is excellent."

The background to which Flynn refers is as a ratings-booster. At the time of hiring Howell, Flynn noted that, "this guy took over a number three rated news operation four years ago and now it gets a 46 share. I think that's pretty good."¹⁴

¹⁴"Swift shift; young news director replaces Von Ende at Channel 2," Detroit Free Press, April 23, 1982, p. D9.

Numerous other changes followed. Some positions were consolidated in an attempt to cut costs and improve efficiency. In all, 47 people were terminated. But, as Flynn pointed out, it was the turnover in on-air talent which received the most publicity. And again, this was largely due to the loyalty of the Detroit audience.

Flynn said it was easy to determine the attitude of the Detroit audience towards WJBK-TV's news programming. "They obviously wanted something other than what we were giving them; they wanted people other than who we had." Turnover was therefore inevitable.

Flynn underestimated the loyalty of the Detroit audience when he first came in and it became evident to him after the firing of Sonny Eliot.

Though the dismissal of veteran sportscaster Ray Lane took place at about the same time, it was the firing of Sonny Eliot which was the cause of Flynn's initial bad publicity. As Eliot said, "You can do almost anything in television except offend your audience, but that's what Flynn did."

Not only was Eliot a Detroit favorite, but Flynn's method of firing Eliot was not overflowing with tact. As Eliot pointed out, he had eaten with Flynn the previous week and Flynn gave no indication that there was a problem. As Eliot was preparing his portion of the July 16 newscast, weather, he was called into Flynn's office and informed that he had been terminated. The reason: his appeal was to an older audience.

Mike Duffy pointed out that it has been Flynn's style to make quick changes wherever he goes. But the firing of Eliot was extreme, especially given the loyalty of the Detroit audience, many of whom, like myself, had grown up watching "Sonny at the Zoo," as avidly as "Milky the Clown." More importantly, Flynn made a major mistake in publicly announcing the reason for Eliot's dismissal in harsh terms. Sonny's act, he said, "was 10 or 12 years ago. It's not today."¹⁵

The research on Eliot was conducted by Selection Research Institute (SRI), out of Lincoln, Neb. An SRI representative indicated via telephone the methods generally used in SRI's studies. Most of their research, he confided, was done by telephone. Using tracking research, the company uses a fixed number of surveys 21 days per month. Using random digit dialing in the area of dominant influence (ADI), the company would control age, sex, county of residence, attitudes toward talent, awareness of talent and interests.

Eliot said he doesn't believe the research. "Most of my mail--75 percent of it--is from people under 35," he said. Moreover, if Sonny's act is old, his attitude isn't. "News programs are usually so grim that some relief is needed," he said. "If you make it somewhat lighter while still giving the information, you'll have more positive results, I think."

Eliot is not, however, unrealistic. "Anytime you get new management, you'll get exactly what happened at Channel 2

¹⁵ Matt Beer, "Sunday Brunch," The Detroit News Magazine, February 27, 1983, p. 8.

at Channel 4 and at Channel 7. Whenever there's a new management, there's a new concept, a new perception and new people."

Ben Brown wrote at the time that, "executives at the other Detroit stations saw plenty of research on Sonny Eliot and his audience. And except for Bob McBride--who may have paid with his job for his judgment in such matters--they all believed what Flynn has come to believe."¹⁶

Brown also said that it doesn't even matter if the research is accurate. If the advertisers believe it, it's as good as an accepted fact.¹⁷

Detroit News columnist Pete Waldmeir put the situation into its proper perspective. "I'll wager that folks will long remember the cold unfeeling way Flynn gave Sonny the hook."¹⁸

At the same time, the incident clearly illustrates the danger in going public with research findings. Eliot said that he was unaware of the research concerning his image until Flynn made it public. Given the furor that it caused--the station was inundated with angry phone calls--releasing information of this nature does not seem to be in the best interests of management. This may be the reason that management personnel interviewed for this study decided not to disperse information of this nature.

Eliot's replacement was already at WJBK-TV when Eliot was fired. Chuck Gaidica, a 24-year-old weathercaster from

¹⁶Ben Brown, "Cloudy Days," Detroit News, July 19, 1982, p. B1. ¹⁷IBID.

¹⁸Pete Waldmeir, "TV-2 deserves lumps for the way it fired Sonny Eliot," Detroit News, July 23, 1982, p. C14.

Little Rock, Ark., had been hired a few weeks before as the number two weatherman. John Howell said he had been watching Gaidica for about a year, "but I was in a small market (Fresno) and I couldn't offer him a better job." When Howell got to Detroit, he was in a position to offer Gaidica that better position, and did.¹⁹

Ben Brown described the Gaidica style as a "copy of John Coleman's on 'Good Morning America,' involving pull-out maps and electronic matting systems. Lots of video effects," would replace Eliot's writing on maps with chalk.²⁰

George Bullard indicated that there were rumors to the effect that Bob McBride had practically, "given away the shop," with bad contracts. Flynn denied that the situation was ever that extreme, but admitted that there were some contracts that he would not have signed. One such contract was most likely that of Beverly Draper.

Numerous articles reported that Draper's contract called for setting the play of stories. Ben Brown wrote that there was "clearly a power struggle between the anchorwoman, who enjoyed a certain favored status with the previous management, and the new news director. According to Mrs. Draper, Howell told her he wasn't going to let her run the newsroom. And according to Howell, Mrs. Draper asked for the right to make decisions that are his province as news director."²¹

¹⁹ Ben Brown, "Stepping into Sonny's shoes," Detroit News, July 20, 1982, p. B1. ²⁰IBID.

²¹ Ben Brown, "Beverly Draper: 'I want out,'" Detroit News, August 11, 1982, p. B1.

Whether Draper's contract actually called for setting the play of stories or not, it is certain that she was not happy with her role at WJBK-TV under Flynn's management. "There wasn't enough water in the pot for Beverly to even want to swim," Flynn said.

After six weeks of vacation and sick leave, Draper returned to WJBK-TV's airwaves in August, 1982, prepared to move out. She told Ben Brown that Howell was, "taking away my lead anchor status. I'm the only female lead-anchor in town. . . . Now they're obviously trying to get me to quit. . . . without paying me."²²

The day the above quote appeared in the Detroit News, Draper was suspended by Bill Flynn, without pay, a result of what he described as, "a standard part of any talent's contract," prohibiting, "bringing discredit upon the station."²³

At the end of August, Draper resigned. Flynn indicated at the time that the resignation was, "amicable and mutually agreed upon by both Storer Broadcasting and Mrs. Draper."²⁴

It was at this time that John Conyers, U. S. Congressman, formed a committee to look into minority representation on local TV stations. The committee began to collect charges against WJBK-TV which it would present to the FCC in 1983.

²²Ben Brown, "Beverly Draper: 'I want out,'" Detroit News, August 11, 1982, p. B1.

²³"Channel 2 benches Beverly Draper," Detroit News, August 13, 1982, p. D10.

²⁴George Bullard, "Beverly Draper resigns from Channel 2 news," Detroit News, September 1, 1982, p. B1.

The complaint concerning Draper suggested that her dismissal was an example of race discrimination. There is a major flaw with this charge; if it were race discrimination, Kathy Adams, who, like Draper, is black, would not have been hired.

Actually, the acquisition of Adams was announced the day before Draper's fateful statement to the Detroit News. She was to arrive in October, 1982, to assume roles as a reporter and weekend co-anchor. Though Howell stated that she was not being hired as Draper's replacement, the move most certainly had to have some impact on Draper's attitude.²⁵ And when Draper left, Adams indeed became her replacement.

June Brown wrote in the Detroit News that those who thought Draper was fired because of her race were wrong. Instead, she said, it was greed.

Ratings clearly are more important than race. Television employes often say that TV bosses would fire their own starving mothers if they thought that would make their ratings soar. . . .

When favorites like Beverly and Sonny Eliot leave, the public is enraged because it feels the station had no loyalty. The public is right. Loyalty is non-existent in television. The only loyalty in TV is the loyalty of the fans toward their favorites.²⁶

Adams, like sports director Fred McLeod and "P.M. Magazine," co-host Matty Majors, had worked for Flynn in Cleveland and, he said, he had a gut feeling that she would do well as an anchor. Race does play a role however:

Detroit is a little different in that you've got a white male/black female co-anchor trend. That's very unusual, but that's what Detroit wants, so you

²⁵June Brown, "Ratings rather than race reign in TV news," Detroit News, Sept. 14, 1982, p. A14. ²⁶IBID.

give it to them. Sometimes you reverse it and get a black male and a white female.

The Glover/Adams combination represented this philosophy well; the same is true of the noon matchup of Virg Jacques, who is black and Linda Mour, who is white.

By December, 1982, most of the talent changes had been made. The station still had the lowest rated news programming however. George Bullard wrote at the time that the news presentation had improved, but that, "winning back an audience is no easy job."²⁶ He indicated that the station had other improvements in mind as well. "A new news set, heavyweight promotion, fresh graphics and a redesigned logo are in the works to signal the changes," he said. "Howell and Flynn hope you notice what's new."²⁷

Unfortunately, while people may have noticed what was new, they also noticed what was old: Joe Glover. George Bullard reported that, "according to the station's research, viewers who turned in to sample," the news, "tuned back out when they saw Glover, who appeared inextricably linked to the old, ratings-starved newscasts."²⁸

It was undoubtedly a difficult decision to release Glover; the station had concentrated much time and effort in his development. Besides, the Detroit market now knew him well; it's hard to give up on someone with such a strong

²⁷George Bullard, "Esprit for the corpse," Detroit News, December 15, 1982, p. B1.

²⁸George Bullard, "Sizing up Sells," Detroit News, May 4, 1983, p. C1.

recognition factor. Nevertheless, it had to be done. The method of firing was similar to that of Sonny Eliot's firing. He got the word, "in a 10-minute meeting in Flynn's office. Glover was already in makeup at the time."²⁹

In an interview with Matt Beer of the Detroit News, Flynn said that his swift manner of firing is not without a philosophy. "It's like pulling tape," he said. "If you do it quickly, it will hurt less. Letting people linger around doesn't do anybody any good."³⁰

Flynn explained that it was necessary to replace Glover because, "he had been here for some time when the station was on the downslide and he was a part of the losers--not the man himself--but the loser image that comes with it."

Glover was not unemployed long. WKBD-TV, which had picked up Sonny Eliot as a replacement for Bill Kennedy as movie host, offered him a job on its news program and he accepted.

Murray Feldman sat in as news anchor until the arrival of Glover's replacement, George Sells, in April, 1983. Sells came to WJBK-TV from KOA-TV in Denver, where in two years, he helped the station move from third to second place in the city's ratings war.³¹ Flynn admits that the success in

²⁹George Bullard, "Clean slate at TV-2," Detroit News, February 27, 1983, p. B1.

³⁰Matt Beer, "Sunday Brunch," Detroit News Magazine, April 24, 1983, p. 10.

³¹George Bullard, "Sizing up Sells," Detroit News, May 4, 1981, p. C1.

Denver was not all attributable to Sells, but adds that, "he sure wasn't hurting it any."

Mike Duffy reported that Sells was lured to Detroit by the prospects of a larger market and larger paycheck. "The money was the first thing," Sells reportedly said, "but they can throw all the money in the world at you and it doesn't matter if it's not a good organization in the first place."³²

In the process of hiring Sells, Howell said he had spoken with many of Sells's former employers, "even people we thought had a reason to dislike him because he had left for a better job. Every person we talked to, from New York to Philadelphia to Houston to Denver, said what a professional newsman George Sells is, not to mention the on-the-air part. He's the catalyst we need."³³

So the number one news team was set. George Sells, Kathy Adams, Fred McLeod and Chuck Gaidica became the front-liners. Stu Klitenic, the exuberant sportscaster mentioned earlier in this thesis, was moved to the 5:30 newscast. Virg Jacques and Linda Mour took over at noon. Roy Weissinger, Linda Mour, Mark Barash (sports) and Don Paul (weather) made up the weekend team.

With the process of changing the news team completed, John Howell resigned his position at WJBK-TV to become news director at WKBW-TV in Buffalo. He was replaced by David

³²Mike Duffy, "Channel 2's new anchor: George Sells," Detroit Free Press, February 28, 1983, p. A12.

³³George Bullard, "Sizing up Sells," Detroit News, May 4, 1983, p. C4.

Lippoff, who as assistant news director was involved in many of Howell's decisions.

Now it was time to promote the new news team. The focus originally was on star status and similarity to the community. Sells was shown being recognized by a fan at a gas station, Adams was shown being recognized by a fan in a butcher shop and McLeod was shown being recognized by two fans at a baseball game, all in separate commercials.

Gaidica was promoted differently. People dressed as storm clouds and lightning bolts were shown complaining about Gaidica, who always ruins their fun by correctly predicting when they will show up. Suddenly, he appears, flanked by rays of sunshine, drives the bad weather away, and presents his trademark: his smile.

After a few months, the promotional style changed. The new focus was on journalistic integrity. Dan Rather was shown casually talking with Sells and Adams on the news set about their journalistic commitment and concern for the Detroit community. In one such spot, he pointed out Adams's March of Dimes button, a symbol of her community concern. Though CBS can certainly be said to have gained from the publicity itself, the promotions were the idea of WJBK-TV's promotional staff.

"Rather came out here at our suggestion to speak to the Economic Club of Detroit," Flynn said, "but only because all the major automotives are here. But it's good for the network too. So while he was here, we grabbed him for an hour-and-a-half and cut a lot of promos. We just shot tape

and edited promos out of the tape."

Flynn said that it was in the best interests of CBS to have these advertisements playing in the Detroit area. "Rather dominates around the country," he said. "This is the lowest rated market in the United States for the CBS network news. That's a ridiculous situation so they want to help."

In addition to the promos with Rather, individual spots were done for Sells and Adams, concentrating on their journalistic commitment. Each asserts that they want to be the best in their field and will work hard to do it.

Still, it is difficult to pinpoint a specific image for the current WJBK-TV news. Moreover, Flynn wants it that way, at least for now. This may be wise. Given the problems with the Lee Thornton promotion, it might be better for the station to ease itself into the market first. Only time will tell the total effect of these efforts.

In August, 1983, Ann Doyle, who had been a sports anchor prior to Flynn's arrival, resigned her position as sports reporter, citing the demotion as the reason. Her departure caused few waves, however.

The 1983 MDA Telethon added to the already dramatic state of affairs at WJBK-TV under Flynn's direction. As already illustrated, Joe Glover had been quite successful at hosting the Detroit segments of the show over a period of many years. He had come to be associated with the Detroit segments of the show. But Glover was no longer associated with WJBK-TV.

Since WJBK-TV carried the telethon, their front-man, George Sells, was the host. The difference was noticeable.

While Glover had developed a smooth approach over his years of association with the MDA, Sells was obviously new to the operation. The awkwardness was apparent, at least to this viewer.

While Sells was hosting the Detroit segments, Glover and Eliot were at various fund-raisers throughout the duration of the telecast. But, as Eliot explained, Flynn gave orders that no shots of either of them were to be taken. Rumors of this action surfaced quickly and may have added to the negative personal image Flynn was receiving in the area.

Understandably, the station was beginning to build the Sells community image in much the same way as it had built Glover's. But keeping the cameras off Glover and Eliot seemed cruel to the loyal Detroit public. Mike Duffy explained that, "the reason they're willing to turn over their air time for that length of time is not just because of the goodness of their hearts and their community spirit; it's because they can have one of their people out front being associated with a very good cause and that provides good publicity. It's the same with Mort Crim and the March of Dimes."

This attitude carried its way to the movie industry. Sonny Eliot said that Flynn kept him from a small role, as a Detroit weatherman, in the Detroit-based movie, "The XYZ Murders." "Flynn wouldn't let them use the WJBK-TV studios if I was on, so Chuck Gaidica got the role," he said. That's unfortunate, because Gaidica has not been established in the market long enough to be a true representative; Eliot has. In fact, at the Detroit Tigers 1984 home opener, it was Eliot who caught the

first pitch (from Mayor Young).

In November, 1983, David Lippoff resigned as news director, reportedly over a disagreement with Flynn, and became executive news producer at KPIX-TV in San Francisco. He was replaced by Bill Vance, who had been news director at KXAS-TV in Dallas-Fort Worth.³⁴

At about the same time, Flynn received more bad publicity when the Free Press printed a story on a sexual harassment charge against Flynn. Mike Duffy, who wrote the story, said he believes that this incident is what made Flynn most distrustful of Detroit newspaper reportage. Flynn to this day will not speak personally with Duffy, who now pieces his stories together with accounts of news producers and assistants.

The story concerned Carla O'Neill, who had produced WJBK-TV's 6 P.M. news before being demoted to weekend news, "several days after the alleged encounter with Flynn in June, 1982." She was fired six months later.

Interestingly, O'Neill is not herself convinced that the purported encounter is what led to her demotion and eventual dismissal. "But, after being contacted by the coalition gunning for Flynn, she started again wondering about what happened 17 months ago: 'I'm not saying that that, in effect, led to my dismissal,' she said, 'but it just looks very suspicious to me, either way.'" ³⁵

³⁴George Bullard, "The news director go-round," Detroit News, November 9, 1983, p. E3.

³⁵George Bullard, "Sex harassment charge denied by Channel 2," Detroit News, November 16, 1983, p. B3.

Her account was added to the complaints that the Statewide Media Accountability Coalition (SMAC) had been collecting since Beverly Draper's resignation and had presented to the FCC in October, 1983.

The ARB charts used on pages 49 and 50 of this thesis were taken from Storer Broadcasting's extensive response to the charges. The charts were used to demonstrate the poor performance of the station's news operations when Flynn took charge and to specifically demonstrate the dismal performance record of the 6 P.M. newscasts, which had been running a poor third following a steep decline in audience share in 1981.

With respect to O'Neill's charges, Howell and Lippoff both signed statements claiming mutual responsibility for the reassignment and eventual dismissal. Both stated that Flynn neither ordered nor suggested the actions. In fact, both men wrote that she asked to be relieved of her weekday position at the exact time when they were considering changing her status.³⁶

The charges presented by SMAC center around sex, age and race discrimination in WJBK-TV's employment practices. The station's reply was extensive. A summary of portions of the reply follows:

1. Sex discrimination: Female employees increased from 15.8 percent to 20.4 percent in the top four categories and from 27.6 percent to 28.7 percent overall. . . . Since Bill Flynn's arrival, women have replaced men in

³⁶Storer Broadcasting Co. (WJBK-TV), "Motion to Return, 'Reply to Opposition to Petition to Deny,'" presented to the Federal Communications Commission, Washington, D.C., 1983, file #BRCT-830601VN, exhibits D and E.

the following positions: Assistant General Manager; Program Director; Assignment Desk Planning Editor; Producer-Editor (news); Associate Producer (P.M. Magazine); On-Air Reporter; Local Sales Manager; Advertising and Creative Services Manager; On-Air Production Manager, Advertising and Creative Services; and Salesperson.

2. Race Discrimination: Of the 47 terminations since Bill Flynn's arrival, only eight were blacks. Thirty-six were white. . . .

Beverly Draper and Lee Thornton were both replaced by blacks. . . .

Only eight of the 36 staff positions eliminated between 1982 and 1983 were held by blacks (not 14 of 20 as SMAC alleged).

3. Age discrimination: Twenty-nine of the 47 terminations involved employees aged forty or less.

If any pattern can be said to have emerged under Mr. Flynn's leadership, therefore, it would suggest that the station tended to primarily fire white males under the age of forty.³⁷

The reply summarized WJBK-TV's overall objectives as follows:

1. Management changes are not unknown in the television industry. They are usually necessitated by unsatisfactory station performance and, among other things, the new management team usually reassigns or replaces personnel in order to improve that performance. That is what happened here.

2. The situation is compounded during economic recessions--particularly in such soft markets as Detroit--by the need to trim costs and increase overall station efficiency. That is also what happened here

3. Replacing station personnel is neither pleasant nor inexpensive. It is at best unhappy and costly, but it is at times unavoidable. And at those times, it also seems inevitable that some affected persons will feel that their dismissals were unjustified on the merits. Looking for other reasons, they then turn to other persons for help--to friends believed to be influential, to competitor newspaper columnists who trade in gossip, and ultimately to the agency which controls the station's license. In so doing, they

³⁷ Storer Broadcasting Co. (WJBK-TV), "Motion to Return, 'Reply to Opposition to Petition to Deny,'" presented to the FCC, Washington, D.C., 1983, file #BRCT-830601VN pp. 9, 10, and 12.

raise old claims the FCC dismissed years ago; they point to already-dismissed discrimination complaints as "pending at this time; they recite "facts" which could only have been spun from imagination; and they rise to such creativity as to claim that embezzlement is not grounds for dismissal but merely, "assertiveness in expressing my desire to be financially compensated for my abilities." All of this has happened here.³⁸

Disdain for the news media is evident in the reply. But, given the nature, and apparent weakness, of O'Neill's charges, this is understandable.

The bad publicity for Flynn did not, however, keep WJBK-TV from improving its audience share. The November, 1983 Arbitron ratings showed that WJBK-TV had edged out WDIV-TV at 11 P.M. with a 25 percent share compared to WDIV-TV's 24 percent share; WXYZ-TV drew a 34 percent share. George Bullard analyzed the situation at WJBK-TV:

Channel 2 is a CBS affiliate and contributing factors here include CBS's strong 10 P.M. shows that lead into the late news. "Emerald Point N.A.S.," "Knots Landing," and "Falcon Crest," continually play well. Under the laws of TV inertia, it's better to have viewers already tuned in rather than requiring them to switch from another channel. And all the better for Channel 2 that they have an attractive 11:30 program like, "Taxi," follow the newscast. "Taxi," gets 25 percent of the audience, better than ABC's, "Nightline," (22 percent), and Johnny Carson (21 percent). . . . The same inertia law probably hurts Channel 4's 11 P.M. news, which follows the number three network's weak lead-in shows. One of NBC's 10 P.M. offerings, "Bay City Blues," was so unwatched that it was yanked from the air for a while. . . . The art of lining up compatible shows is sometimes called "bracketing," or "hammocking." And it can help a program. But give credit where it's due. Channel 2 also made a lot of changes in the news operation itself. It's become a snappier operation. And--hammocking or not--hardly anyone would have stayed tuned to the

³⁸ Storer Broadcasting Co. (WJBK-TV), "Motion to Return, 'Reply to Opposition to Petition to Deny,'" presented to the FCC, Washington, D.C., 1983, file #BRCT-830601VN, p. 12.

somnambulant program pawned off as news two years ago.³⁹

WJBK-TV's early news was on the rise too, though it still placed third in the Detroit race. Flynn said WJBK-TV would now focus on surrounding programming. Given the success of "Family Feud," nationwide, WJBK-TV has retained the syndicated game show at 5 P.M. Instead, Flynn said, "Eight is Enough," was replaced by, "Charlie's Angels," at 4 P.M. in hopes that this would increase the lead-in for "Family Feud," and, eventually, the news. Should this not prove successful, it would not be surprising to see WJBK-TV replace, "Family Feud," as well.

George Bullard wrote that you can, "say what you want about Channel 2's Bill Flynn and his hiring and firing in the newsroom. The ratings gains are coming along just about the time the brass predicted they might. The pluses are modest, but at least it's now a bull market for the Storer Broadcasting station; it has reversed its drift into ratings bankruptcy behind the reruns of 'Starsky and Hutch,' and such."⁴⁰

For all the bad publicity Flynn has received, it seems quite apparent that he is accomplishing his purpose; the station is moving up in the ratings. But Flynn is not yet totally satisfied. "I'm looking at the guys who are ahead of all of us," he said, referring to WXYZ-TV. Given his attitude and performance, there is no doubt that WJBK-TV is in a better position now than it was when he arrived.

³⁹ George Bullard, "No clean sweeps in November,"
Detroit News, December 6, 1983, pp. B1 and B2. ⁴⁰ IBID., p. B1.

February, 1984 provides an interesting conclusion to this study, primarily due to the absence of Bill Bonds from WXYZ-TV's news. Bonds was hospitalized for leg problems on February 3 and did not return until March. As a result, the February, 1984, Arbitron ratings reflect on a non-Bonds Detroit market. The results are as follows:

Early News: WXYZ-TV, 24 percent; WDIV-TV, 23 percent; and WJBK-TV, 14 percent.
Late News: WXYZ-TV, 30 percent; WJBK-TV, 25 percent; and WDIV-TV, 24 percent.

Interpretation of the ratings depends on who you talk to. At WXYZ-TV, Bob Rowe emphasized that the station remained number one without Bonds and with poor lead-in from the Olympics, which, he said, did poorly because of the poor showing of the United States team. He emphasized the confidence of the Detroit audience in the entire WXYZ-TV news operation as the primary reason that the station maintained a lead in the ratings.

Bob Warfield gave a detailed analysis of the situation from his viewpoint:

They only beat us by one share point and they threw the biggest programming CBS has thrown in five years for its affiliates. They are giving the appearance of being back in the race, but they're not. We are the number three network in this nation with NBC. On any given night, an ABC affiliate will pull a 35 share of the audience for their ten O'clock show; a CBS affiliate will pull around a 30 share; an NBC affiliate will pull around an 18. So we must increase our audience eight share points to get to that 24 share. WJBK-TV, on the other hand, will drop eight to ten share points, to a 20 or 22. You've got a product problem if you drop ten share points.

Bill Flynn admitted that, "it used to be that we would have a 30 share at 10:45 and drop to 12 or 15 while WXYZ-TV

would jump five audience shares because Bonds was there. That wasn't happening when he was gone. We would drop to a 24 share instead. People sampled and apparently, they liked what they saw."

Flynn said that Bonds has returned with a new image: that of the underdog. "That's what he came back with, the underdog--poor Billy, to overcome these sicknesses. Now, I like the guy, but he needed to be the underdog like I need a hole in my head."

Whoever's interpretation you accept, one thing is certain: the Detroit television news market is extremely competitive. Moreover, given the size of the market and the financial importance of each station's news programming, the market will undoubtedly remain competitive and, if one station starts a downward trend, the methods utilized to improve that station's performance will most certainly resemble those presented in this thesis.

AN OVERVIEW

Detroit is an interesting news market. While it generally takes about two years for the audience to accept news personalities as being a part of the community, once they have been accepted, the fans are loyal, even if they don't watch the newscasts on which these personalities appear. This is certainly the case at WJBK-TV, where ratings slid drastically in 1981 to a point where the early evening newscasts often finished behind WKBD-TV's syndicated rerun offerings. In spite of this decline, loyal Detroit fans complained about the departure of Beverly Draper, Joe Glover

and Sonny Eliot. While it may be argued that Flynn was harsh in his method of firing, it is hard to argue with the results. WJBK-TV edged out WDIV-TV at 11 P.M. in November, 1983 and February, 1984. With George Sells, Kathy Adams, Fred McLeod and Chuck Gaidica having been together in the market for merely a year, this ratings improvement is quite impressive.

Clearly, the Detroit television news market has been dominated by WXYZ-TV and its star anchorman, Bill Bonds, for many years. This has made it essentially a race for second place in the market. Both WDIV-TV and WJBK-TV have had the dubious distinction of finishing fourth in a three station news market. In both cases, management and on-air talent was changed in the effort to improve the station's standings. For WDIV-TV, these changes began in 1979. While the early news took over second place by mid-1981, it was not until 1982 that the station had clearly established itself as the number two news station, a period of about two-and-a-half years. As WDIV-TV took over second place, the turnovers began at WJBK-TV. The process is cyclical.

The absence of Bonds in February, 1984 has given both WDIV-TV and WJBK-TV new hope that given the right conditions, their station might actually take over the number one spot. Unfortunately, the right conditions must almost undoubtedly include the departure of Bonds from WXYZ-TV.

With respect to the negative public attitude towards Bill Flynn, while it may be argued that his "tape-pulling" methods of firing lack a degree of tact, public sentiment

is based more on fan loyalty than it is on a knowledge of the business behind the box.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS AND GENERALIZATIONS

The findings of this study support the conclusions of theorists regarding audience and news reception. There is, indeed, an entertaining nature to the television news business; as a result, stations tend to give the people a dose of entertainment in their news programming in order to compel the audience to watch.

It is also true that television news is packaged as a commodity, marketed and promoted. To be successful in turning a poor situation around, one must first analyze the market, then develop a position within that market. Often, that position is brought about by developing an image for a newscast, news team or newsperson; this is done in much the same way as corporate image development, by demonstrating a concern for the community over an extended period of time.

For lack of a better measuring device, the ratings services of A.C. Nielsen and Arbitron are taken as a reflection of the success, or lack of such, of news programming. While Nielsen ratings are the nationally quoted ratings, Arbitron is more important to salesmen in the Detroit area because advertisers base their purchases on Arbitron.

The financial advantages of strong ratings cannot be

overstated. As a result, stations with poor ratings must take steps to improve such. This is not a simple task; usually, it involves a high turnover rate among both management personnel and news talent. While research is used as a tool in determining audience acceptance to a given news program or personality, it is not always acted upon. Stations keep active files of tapes to be aware of the available talent.

At the same time, there will always be a turnover in talent due to the natural desire to want to move up, which in this business can mean moving to a larger market or taking a more lucrative position within the same market.

Nothing can be accomplished quickly. It takes time for an audience to sample a newscast and even more time for the people on that newscast to be perceived as a part of the community they serve.

In hiring new personnel, station managers and news directors often rely on gut instinct. Nevertheless, much is spent on research.

The importance of adjacent programming cannot be overlooked in the evaluation of a station's news performance. While the station controls its own lead-in for the early newscasts, this is generally not the case for the 11 P.M. newscasts. Often a station must overcome a poor lead-in to get a respectable share of the audience. Sometimes, as with WXYZ-TV news, the news show itself can provide a solid lead-in for the network news.

In Detroit, as with many cities, fans become loyal to the television personalities who deliver the news. The strength

of a Bill Bonds in a marketplace can create major difficulty for the competing newscasts. Nobody wants to be third and when a consistent pattern of third-place finishes develops, the turnovers generally begin.

It is interesting to note the similarities between WDIV-TV and WJBK-TV in attempting to overcome their difficulties in news programming. New management hires new talent. The talent is promoted; a market position is set. Then, management moves on, presumably to do the same thing elsewhere. At WDIV-TV and WJBK-TV, this happened. In both cases, the news director had much influence in the station's transition. In each case, the news director left when the new news team was in place and apparently beginning to be accepted in the market. And, in both cases, they were replaced by their assistant news directors, who had been with them during the turnover and were aware of the particular strategies which had been set for the station.

Though there is an obvious cosmetic value in the industry, management personnel do not discuss it. They are aware of how superficial it is and do not want bad publicity. While they do admit to adding an element of entertainment, it can be argued that television is an entertaining medium and that this is therefore desirable.

For similar reasons, management is often reluctant to release information to the press. They consider much of their research, marketing strategies and hiring practices to be trade secrets. As a result, reporters must often estimate the finances of the stations on which they report.

Salaries of talent are generally high in Detroit, as they are in most major markets. This is, however, understandable. The better the talent, the higher the ratings, the more a station can charge for advertisements and, the better the station's image.

Television news is a business, like it or not. And though it is not uncommon for a television newscaster to put in a 15-hour day, television news can never be more than a headline service. For this reason, print journalists often discount the importance of television journalists.

It is the medium which determines the method. Television is a graphic, entertaining medium, so it tends towards the graphic, entertaining stories. This is not to say that much good journalism doesn't come out of it; it does. But there will always be a cosmetic value to the industry which tends to devalue the importance of the news story and favor the value of a ratings point.

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