

Project Leader's Recommended Readings for Competing Values Jumpstart

Project 2: Transforming News (Project Lead: Linda Sullivan)

“News Isn’t Wasted on the Young” by David Carr, *New York Times*, February 18, 2008.

“Gannett out to ‘Re-engineer’ Its Stations” by Dave Lougee (Gannett) with Kathy Haley (TV Newsday publisher), *TV Newsday*, February 19, 2008.

“Nielsen Online Takes a Look at How People Use Web Video” by Emily Steel, *Wall Street Journal*, February 13, 2008.

“Local TV Still Top News Pick, But Technology and Hype Nibble at Edges,” by Jill Geisler, PoynerOnline, October 3, 2006 (based on “2006 Future of News” study).

“Breaking News” by John Gonzalez, *Boston Magazine*, November 2005.

February 18, 2008**THE MEDIA EQUATION**

News Isn't Wasted on the Young

By [DAVID CARR](#)

Last Tuesday, [Barack Obama](#) stood in front of 15,000 shouting supporters in Madison, Wis., basking in wins in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia. In addition to issuing a classic call to arms for the rest of the campaign, Mr. Obama took time out to welcome any Republicans to his bandwagon.

“There’s one right there, an ‘Obamican,’ that’s what we call them. They whisper to me, they say, ‘Barack, I’m a Republican, but I support you,’ ” he said in an exaggerated white-guy cadence. “And I say, ‘Thank you,’ ” again using the comic stage whisper.

What seemed like a bit of black humor — doing whitespeak à la Dave Chappelle — was really something else. The bit made a straight-line connection to an audience full of college kids raised on that kind of humor, regardless of race.

“People thought it was hysterical,” said Sam Finesurrey, an Obama supporter who is 21. “It wasn’t very presidential, but it was really effective.”

Politics has had a rough time getting a date on campus for the past few decades. But that was before the Great Election Hook-up of 2008, where young people not only engaged in the biggest news of the season, they made some.

On Feb. 5, turnout among that supposedly disengaged demographic aged 18 to 29 doubled in Massachusetts, tripled in Georgia, Missouri and Oklahoma and quadrupled in Tennessee. Barack Obama isn’t the only candidate to reach out successfully to young voters, but he owes much of his strength at the polls to a ferocious band of young voters who have broken a path for him in almost every primary.

His success did not happen in a vacuum. Youth voting has been rising in each of the last two elections. But there are specific lessons in the Obama phenomenon. He talks about issues young people care about, and while rarely patronizing, uses both classic speaking gifts and a contemporary touch for the pop culture vernacular that resonates to hit the sweet spot with a very tough demographic. Is there room on those coattails for big media?

Maybe so. Cable stations whose average demographic looks like the afternoon crowd at the Legion Hall bar are suddenly pulling in young viewers. During the week of Feb. 5 voting, CNN’s ratings among viewers aged 18 to 34 were up 232 percent over the same week in 2004. Fox was up 78 percent, and MSNBC was up a whopping 400 percent (although from a much smaller base).

It’s not just the cable stations. Over all, according to Nielsen, ratings for television news programming of all kinds doubled among young viewers on the big night of primaries. A politics application that is a mash-up

of ABC News and [Facebook](#) has been downloaded by 1.25 million users. Debates have brought in YouTube and Facebook as co-sponsors, and record numbers of young people with them. More than one college newspaper has suggested that “politics is the new black” on campus.

“A few years ago, politics was definitely not a cool thing to be into,” said Mr. Finesurrey, a sophomore and an Obama supporter at the [University of Wisconsin](#) whom I found in the process of researching this column (translation: he’s a friend of my daughter). “You walk into a house full of students and CNN is on. People who do it are not looked upon as nerdy.”

Politics isn’t just the B.M.O.C., but its own wingman, too. “It used to be that you never discussed politics on the first date,” he said. “Now there is nothing else to talk about.”

The news media have complained for years about this demographic: they don’t read newspapers, they don’t watch news on television, they don’t care about politics. But maybe the news gave up on them, not the other way around.

“Young people are being paid attention to this time around and they have responded in kind, both in terms of politics and news about politics,” said Dhavan V. Shah, a journalism professor at the University of Wisconsin. “Whether the election coverage can translate into sustained regular attention from younger viewers depends on what happens. If they are staked in what happens, they will continue to follow the news.”

Who let all these kids in? Not the news executives, who don’t — and shouldn’t — take credit for the huge influx of young viewers. There is, after all, no substitute for great casting and it’s hard to beat a cadre of candidates that includes a war hero, a former first lady and a first-term senator who happens to be black.

The cable news outlets are all conscious that new, younger eyes are on them. They may not know who John King of CNN is, but they recognize the technology behind the giant [iPod](#)-like device that allows him to parse information at the flick of a finger. David Bohrman, the executive producer of CNN’s political coverage, found the device at a spy convention.

“Maybe I should be thinking about the younger viewer more, but we are just trying to come up with a program that gives our audience a clear picture of what is going on, and the graphic display is part of that,” Mr. Bohrman said. But he added, “I was shocked when I saw the demographic breakdown on our Democratic debate in Los Angeles and saw that there were over a million people 18 to 34 watching. I find that very reassuring.”

Fox News parodied CNN’s fascination with gimcracks by having [Karl Rove](#) hand-draw a map with a grease pencil on a white board. But Fox is not going grumpy-pants on principle: it has its own share of technology and fire-power arrayed over the election.

The network received over 160,000 text messages after its most recent presidential debates and has been using 100 college journalists from [ThePalestra.com](#) to supplement coverage. MSNBC, which has historically been in third place, but has the younger demographics in a very crusty sector, is seeking to exploit what it sees as an opportunity. [Keith Olbermann](#) has shown up in both political and sports coverage on NBC and MSNBC, and it’s not coincidence. MSNBC is shooting for a loosey-goosey ESPN dynamic in its coverage.

“If MSNBC is going to challenge CNN, we are going to have to pull in younger viewers because the older viewers already have their habits,” said Phil Griffin, the senior vice president at NBC who is in charge of MSNBC. “We are making a conscious effort to appeal to younger viewers by doing a brighter, faster program with more point of view and more fun.”

When Sara Verkuilen, 22, a senior at Edgewood College in Madison (translation: my daughter's roommate) is looking for political news, she goes with CNN, but not because of the gadgetry.

“I think it's kind of stupid and unnecessary. What does all that stuff do anyway? But they are reliable, they are up-to-date and they are mostly unbiased,” she said. “The candidates, Obama in particular, are talking about things that actually relate to us and I like staying up-to-date.”

Peter Levine, director of Circle, a research center on young people's civic engagement, suggested that it was the political institutions and the media that left young people behind, rather than the other way around.

“I think that there is a clear message in here for the media: these campaigns have made very direct and serious pitches to young people and they have responded,” he said. “I think it demonstrates that if you approach them in a specific way about things they care about, they will engage.”

A long dormant civic reflex in young people is roaring to life. The question is, can old media outlets take this current round of speed-dating and convert it into something that lasts?

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Wednesday, February 20, 2008



EXECUTIVE SESSION WITH DAVE LOUGEE

GANNETT OUT TO 'RE-ENGINEER' ITS STATIONS

TVNEWSDAY, FEB. 19, 8:24 AM ET

The new head of the 23-station TV group says big changes in the media marketplace are demanding big changes in the ways that stations do business. At Gannett, that means more AEs and news producers on the street, close cooperation with the newspapers on the Web, mobile broadcasting and an interactive relationship with viewers.

News producers and account executives at Gannett TV stations take note: your new boss wants you out.

No, **Dave Lougee** is not planning wholesale layoffs. He simply wants more station employees on the street finding new advertisers and collecting video.

It's part of an evolving strategy for keeping TV stations viable in a media environment that is offering consumers more and more choices.

Lougee succeeded the retiring Roger Ogden as president of Gannett's 23-station broadcasting division last July.

Lougee joined Gannett from Belo, where he ran 19 TV stations and four cable news outlets as executive vice president/media operations.

He is one of those rare station group chiefs who came up from the news side of the business.

He was a news director at three stations, including Gannett's KUSA Denver, before taking over as GM of Belo's TV and cable news operations in Seattle-Tacoma in 2000. He later moved into the Belo corporate ranks.

In this interview with TVNEWSDAY Publisher Kathy Haley, Lougee talks about other parts of the Gannett strategy—stations and newspapers working together on the Web to exploit their combined 100-market footprint, a joint venture with Tribune that is creating new community sites, preserving extra digital spectrum for mobile broadcasting and developing a “true” interactive relationship with viewers.

An edited transcript:

You've been in charge of Gannett's TV Station group about six months now. What is the most interesting challenge you've encountered so far in your role there?

There have been a number of them, but one of the fun challenges has been taking advantage of the opportunities that technology and other tools are providing us to re-engineer the stations, both on the content and the sales side.

Re-engineer them?

As the business climate changes, it's imperative for us to evolve the way our sales and news operations are structured. It's not a black-and-white situation and it won't happen overnight, but we need to evolve it.

How are you re-engineering sales?

We have been evolving to focus less on transactional sales and more on concept selling. What we are doing now is accelerating that rate of change.

What's the difference?

With the ability to use our Web sites, mobile and other tools, we're able to now offer customers solutions that are more customized than just traditional 30-second spots. But to take advantage of that opportunity, we need to be structured well to do that. We need to consider what kind of talent we hire and what we pay for it.

Are you talking about cross-platform selling?

That's part of it. But there's a parallel, very similar content issue. We have the Information Center concept that we are rolling

out across our newsrooms in the newspaper and the broadcast divisions.

These are 24/7 operations that are publishing and broadcasting out. But they are also taking advantage of the return path in.

Internally, we are training photographers on the newspaper side to shoot video. The broadcast division is providing that training, and, now, we're sending TV reporters to that same training. It's to improve the amount of content and journalism we can provide.

Are you talking about this idea where, instead of sending out a crew to shoot a story, you send out a reporter who does his or her own shooting and standup?

It's not that everyone becomes a one-man band. Newsrooms have reacted to that. They feel it means a reduction in quality. But what's the definition of quality? If a newsroom is only sending out eight reporters on a given day, what happens if they re-engineer the workflow and can send out 24 a day?

We're outfitting these reporters with \$7,000 high-quality HD cameras. We had a reporter from a TV station just accompany a military operation to Camp Phoenix in Afghanistan.

That's an example of where technology is letting us go. Are we a better newsgathering operation with 20 \$50,000 cameras or 100 \$7,000 HD cameras?

We've got our newsrooms actively, intellectually engaged in how to define quality journalism in a digital age, and how to utilize the tools available to us to get there.

How does it change the content?

Here's the discussion that I have at our TV stations. I might go in and ask the general manager how many full time employees work here? In the past, you might have gotten the answer, "150 people."

Then, I ask the general sales manager: "How many account executives do you have on the street right now? Not people back at the station clearing orders. People on the street, selling solutions." He might say, "Six."

And then I say, "How many reporters do you have out getting stories, not somebody producing something long-range or editing a package. How many reporters are out, working on original stories? They might say "five or four."

So my comeback is: So out of 150 employees, only 10 are either producing original content or producing sales.

That's an anachronistic ratio.

Our people are engaged in figuring out how to change that. They are a great group and that's our goal—to say how do we dramatically increase the resources and aggressively change the percentage of people producing local content or selling local customer solutions?

Have you been able to see any results from this yet?

We're in the process. It's not an overnight issue. This is just an acceleration of what's already going on, but our new business development was up dramatically last year. We're doing a company-wide training process on customer-centric selling.

In January, Gannett named a new chief digital officer, Chris Saridakis, to oversee newspaper and stations sites. What's he trying to accomplish?

He's leading our digital efforts. We're in nearly 100 markets between our newspaper and broadcast divisions. We have some very strong brands in those markets and we have a national newspaper. When you start to think about scaling online advertising, and you put our Web sites together, we have a tremendous national footprint. And when you put all of the Web traffic that all of our sites have, we're a large network. Our opportunity is to be seen more in that way.

Are the stations working more closely with Gannett's newspapers than they have in the past?

They've never worked together as much as they are now, and they are doing more every day. Their people are training our people on writing for the Web and our people are training theirs at shooting digital for the Web.

We're also working toward more uniformity on our Web sites. We're going to have one set of advertising standards. Local stations will still have entire control over their local online content and sales, but at the TV stations, if my Cleveland station had 22-second commercial spots, it would be hard to bring together a marketplace to capitalize on that.

It's important to have one set of ad standards so we can more efficiently and effectively market them.

Will your Web sites also have their banner advertising all in the same places, and similar branding and look?

The sites will have a more uniform look in terms of advertising, but they won't give up any of their local content. The new look will debut shortly in a few of our markets.

On which sites?

If you call me in a couple of weeks I'll tell you. We're also rolling out a new video player. We've already purchased it, but we're not public on that yet.

What percentage of revenue at the TV stations will come from online this year?

I don't want to say, but it's continuing to grow.

What are you doing online other than conventional station sites?

We've rolled out a **Web site that focuses on new mothers**. We're in the early stages of that, and shortly we'll announce a joint venture with Tribune that is rolling out entertainment Web sites aimed at young people.

What's it called?

Metromix. It will offer information about local restaurants and entertainment. We're leveraging content, like online video, and doing so very successfully.

Gannett recently acquired HighSchoolSports.net.

Yes. It's a scheduling tool for schools and parents across the country, and it fits nicely with the pretty strong high school sports profile we already have at our newspapers and TV stations.

What are you doing in mobile?

We're members of the Open Mobile Video Coalition. We're very open to the opportunities that will arise from that medium.

We have different experiments going on in both newspaper and TV. We believe the opportunity is in a scaled solution. We don't see the content being produced just on a market-by-market basis. We see a solution where products are rolled out across the nation.

But isn't the attraction of mobile the ability for consumers to get weather and traffic alerts on their phones?

It allows for a lot of those things, but not on a standalone basis. The local content would be part of a scaled national service of offerings. The research on mobile is very compelling, and at the very top of what consumers want is local. It's just like the model we have in traditional television, where the network offers a national service and the affiliates plug in with local programming.

Let's talk about multicasting. Are you satisfied with NBC Weather Plus?

At our NBC affiliates, very much so. We are doing some customized weather solutions in some other markets. But we are being very careful about committing our spectrum. We believe Open Mobile is just one example of where other players are investing in technology to utilize that spectrum. So we're less inclined to be excited about new linear channels.

What kinds of services are you anticipating?

Mobile is a good example of what I'm talking about. It's not just a TV service. It's a rich customer experience. The kind of products that will come out of the Open Mobile group will create a lot of opportunity for consumers. There are other people doing R&D that may more effectively utilize that spectrum for consumers and allow us to utilize that spectrum.

It's not just a passive channel that they're looking at. There are other opportunities to use that spectrum related to the TV space, but in a more innovative way than a passive TV service.

You mean interactive?

Yes. I'm not being coy, but I think we would be limiting ourselves in terms of imagination and revenue if we just signed up our spectrum to linear TV services.

Open mobile, if it is successful, will take advantage of our spectrum. That's one reason to keep it open until we see what develops.

So you are not too excited about the third-party diginets now be offered—LATV, Dot2, RTN, Mexicana!, World

Championship Sports Network?

That's an example to me of pretty unimaginative thinking for use of spectrum.

In the core business of selling advertising on TV, how's business in the first quarter?

All forms of advertising are being affected by the uncertain times right now, but we're pleased by how our stations are performing in that environment.

Toward the end of fourth quarter we saw some softness that will strengthen once advertisers have more confidence in the economy. It's not surprising, the given auto and retail news that you've read about.

Do core advertisers pull back a little in political years?

Buyers who buy media know when political will be a factor and they work to arrange inventory to make sure their message gets heard.

Political advertising will be a very big category for us. We have worked long and hard to use tools to get more sophisticated every year at managing and pricing our inventory so we can maximize it.

Will the new sales efforts that you spoke about, the new business development efforts, ever minimize the shortfall stations see in non-political years?

As long as elections are held every two years you'll never flatten out the impact of such a large category and I don't know why we'd worry about that. It is what it is. We've gotten, as an industry, pretty good at managing it.

In five years, what will the ratio between national and local revenue be?

That's a great question: I categorize it more as between transactional and direct developmental business.

There's a lot of local business that looks and acts more like national business. It's more agency, transactional business—the kind that is "here's the budget that's up in the market and how much can I get."

And then there's the direct, developmental business, where a rep gets to the customer early, and finds out what their marketing needs are and creates marketing solutions.

Our 30-second inventory is a big part of that equation, but our strong brand gives us a big door to local clients that ch. 82 on the dial does not have.

Have you been able to calculate the damages from the writers strike?

Unquantifiable. When a show works or doesn't work, you never know the reason. The strike hasn't helped, but the impact has been overstated a little bit. It would have been a real concern if it had lasted much longer and the fall had been hit. There may be some perceptual damage at the agencies.

No hit revenue-wise?

With our strong local news position overall, our primetime isn't the same percentage of our revenue as at other stations. The weaker the affiliates, the more it would impact them.

You have My Network TV affiliates in Atlanta (WATL) and in Denver (KTVD). What do you think of the network's plans to cut your share of inventory from nine to seven minutes per hour?

We recognize their challenges and the best outcome for us is a strong My Network. We are working with them to achieve a solution that works for us.

You've been quiet on the M&A front since buying the Atlanta and Denver duopoly stations. Are you looking for additional duopoly opportunities? Stations in additional markets?

Like any company, we are in every conversation. We look at anything and everything out there but we would only make moves that make perfect strategic sense.

With the private equity players gone for a while, isn't it a good time for established groups to buy?

Every marketplace is different. There are a lot of variables. I think that, probably, given the pullback in the credit markets, there are fewer financial-only players out there in the space and more strategic players.

If any acquisitions happen, they are more likely to be strategic and made by pure broadcasters.

Your career in television began in news and you served as news director for several major stations, including KUSA, WRC and KING. What is the most important challenge local TV news operations will face in the coming five years?

I would rephrase the question to look at the most important opportunity and that is how can we use both news distribution platforms and the return path from viewers to make our journalism even more relevant?

Are you talking about citizen journalism?

Not just citizen journalism. That is a piece of the equation, but it's in the same genre. The point is, until the Internet came along broadcasters were left with quantitative research tools to try to understand what their customers wanted and needed.

Now, we've got a more sophisticated set of tools on viewers' behavior and what they tell us allows us, through interactive engagement, to create a more relevant product.

There is absolutely no choice. The idea of being a pure broadcaster without having a return path from the customer is no longer valid. I mean to engage the customer not in token ways, not just saying, "Register your vote today." True, active engagement.

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Nielsen Online Takes a Look

At How People Use Web Video

Wall Street Journal

EMILY STEEL

February 13, 2008

In its first significant study of how people consume online video, Nielsen Online has found that women tend to favor network television on the Web, while men are drawn to user-created content.

Women are nearly twice as likely as men to tune into videos on TV networks' Web sites, according to Nielsen Online's first public release of its research into online-video viewing habits.

At the same time, on user-generated media sites, such as YouTube, men 18 to 34 years old were more than twice as likely as women in the same age group to watch videos. That may be because the content and programming now available on user-generated sites consists mostly of short, humor-driven clips that appeal more to young, male audiences, says Michael Pond, a media analyst with Nielsen Online. Nielsen Online is the Web-measurement unit of media-tracking company Nielsen Co.

Online-video viewing has become a standard Web activity -- Nielsen Online says 73% of active Web users watched online video in December -- but marketers are eager for more information about viewership patterns to help them decide how to advertise alongside this content.

Among the other findings: Online-TV viewers are fairly loyal to a particular network's Web site, whereas people are more likely to watch videos on a wide variety of user-generated-content sites. Fans usually tune into a network TV Web site to watch a particular show, find background information or interact with the show in other ways, Mr. Pond says. For example, just 16% of the viewers who watched video content on ABC.com also watched shows on NBC.com.

Poynteronline

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Updated, Oct. 9, 2006

Local TV Still Top News Pick, But Technology and Hype Nibble at Edges

Survey findings reveal the content TV viewers value -- and what they can do without

By [Jill Geisler](#)

Leadership & Management Group Leader

The headline from the [RTNDF](#) "2006 Future of News" study could be this: "Viewers to TV Execs: We're Smarter Than You Think."

Americans are fond of their TV news -- far and away most people cite local television as the place they get most of their news. But they want those broadcasts to be better. They're clear about what they want in their newscasts:

- Weather
- News from around the country and the world
- News about politics, education, health care and the environment -- serious stuff

They're lukewarm about:

- Crime and accidents
- Money and money saving
- Consumer information

They have low interest in:

- Sports
- Entertainment
- Restaurant, movie or entertainment reviews

They are turned off by newscasts and promotions that "cry wolf" about:

- Breaking news that is neither important nor urgent
- Investigative stories that lack depth or significance

They'll back away from newscasts that merge advertising into news, and from anchors or reporters who'd present these things in newscasts:

- Product endorsements
- Product placements
- Stories that seem like commercials

They don't have much interest -- at least right now -- in:

- Blogs
- Newscasts delivered on small, hand-held devices

The study surveyed 1,016 adults of all ages and reports a margin of error of +/- 3 percent. In addition to questioning the general public, researcher [Bob Papper](#) and his team from Ball State University surveyed TV news directors. The goal was to see how well the newsroom decision-makers understood the interests of their viewers or potential viewers. Sometimes the news directors knew the pulse of the viewers, but they underestimated the interest in world and national news and overestimated interest in blogs and small-screen technology. The complete [survey](#) is available on the RTNDA Web site.

For more perspective on the study, I posed some questions to RTNDA President [Barbara Cochran](#) via e-mail. Here are her responses:

JILL GEISLER: The research says that people truly enjoy getting their news from television -- but they want stations to make it better. What's your take?

BARBARA COCHRAN: The public is telling us three important things:

- They want serious news and they are looking for more coverage of national and international news. The war in Iraq, the war on terrorism, conflict in the Middle East, national issues such as the economy and energy prices, global issues such as climate change and pandemic flu -- all of these are issues that people have a personal stake in and they want to stay informed.
- They don't want to be deceived. They want transparency. They don't like scary promos for investigative reporting that doesn't deliver. They want breaking, urgent news to be truly breaking and urgent. They are concerned about hidden influences on the news from business or advertising.
- They want more control. They want to be able to access news at their convenience. They want to get more information instantly about something they see on the news that intrigues them. Many even would like the ability to choose their own stories and assemble their own newscasts.

If you were running a local TV station right now, what information from the research would you put to use right away? What changes would you make?

If I were running a local station now, I would look at the mix of stories in our newscasts and make sure we are incorporating national and international news along with local news.

I would look for ways to localize national and international news to make sure viewers find it relevant. I would examine our promotions and make sure we are delivering on our promises. I would look for ways to make our news content more accessible 24/7 through our Web site and our digital capability. I would find ways to make the news process more transparent to the audience through inviting viewers to submit content or comment on blogs. I would make sure our practices on advertising and news content are clear to all staff and reinforced throughout the station.

There's a warning in the results for stations that are tempted to attract revenue by letting advertisers influence news content of things they sponsor. What's your advice to news directors facing increased pressure to find new revenue opportunities?

RTNDA's news and sales guidelines, developed for RTNDA by [Bob Steele](#) and [Al Tompkins](#) of The Poynter Institute, are very helpful for these situations. They can be found under "[Guidelines for Balancing Business Pressures and Journalism Values](#)" at www.rtna.org. The ultimate question is what the audience would think if they knew the reasons the news department is pursuing a particular story, project or program. If you would be embarrassed to disclose a link between a story and an advertiser, it's probably not a good idea.

The report calls on stations to innovate, but not to assume that people want to abandon their traditional TV news habits. While stations are expanding their Web presence, what else should they be doing, and what should they be wary of?

The survey reaffirms the strength of local television news. Even as stations innovate on the Web and on digital platforms, it is important to keep over-the-air newscasts strong. It is also important that innovation reinforce the station's identity. If you say you are live, local and late-breaking, then your Web site needs to be updated with the latest news and offer plenty of local content. As stations gear up to produce news for more platforms, they should look at how the newsroom is organized. Is the assignment desk organized correctly? Where does the online operation fit in the newsroom? Do reporters and producers need special training in writing, shooting and editing for the Internet or digital media? RTNDA is pulling together resources to help stations answer these questions.

Journalists from all media are interested in attracting young people to consume news. What tactics does the research suggest for broadcast journalism leaders who hope to attract and retain young viewers?

Young people are voracious media consumers, but the survey shows that they distinguish between news and entertainment. They know the difference between a newscast and Jon Stewart's "[The Daily Show](#)." So it would be a mistake to pander to this audience by making newscasts more like entertainment programs. Because they are so immersed in media, young people seem to detect phoniness readily and are very impatient with promotions that exaggerate. They put a high premium on immediacy, and are the most likely age group to want mobile news available on small-screen technology. They like some of the traditions of television news, such as anchors, but they also are most likely to want interactive news. To appeal to this age group, news has to be fast, personally relevant and free of hype.

Barbara Cochran is a past member of Poynter's National Advisory Board.

Jill Geisler is a member of RTNDA, for which she conducts leadership and management workshops; she is also retained by the organization as Leadership Advisor to RTNDF's ongoing Leadership Coaches project.

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Breaking News

Its audience is aging. Younger viewers are going elsewhere for their information fix. Will local TV news follow the network news into oblivion?

By John Gonzalez

From where Gregg Kelley sits, everything is fine. Wonderful, even. And why not? Kelley is the general manager of WFXT-TV, Fox 25—has been for the past seven years. He's in his office, a nice wide space with black leather chairs and a dark wooden desk. Ten plasma televisions—eight small and two large—hang on the wall like artwork, tuned to all manner of programming. A glass partition lets him peer down from his second-floor digs into the Fox newsroom, an ultramodern setup with supersophisticated hardware. Fox 25 completed the multimillion-dollar, 80,000-square-foot studio two years ago. It looks like something out of a sci-fi movie, only hip—lots of computers and television monitors, lots of glass and lights. Lots of cool.

Kelley gets to kick around here every day and call it work. Puts a grin on a man's face. More to the point, Fox 25, which didn't even have a late news show until 1996, is doing pretty well in the local news department. Its morning show is hot, and its ratings are solid at 10 p.m. What's not to be happy about, right?

"We're in a position of strength in all three key demographics," Kelley tells me. "We've been pretty successful with all three groups: 18 to 34, 18 to 49, and 25 to 54. These are the demos that are important in our business."

That's what this is all about: demographics. That's why a lot of people think things could be better for the local news industry—or at least, for its prospects. That's why I came to speak with Kelley—to talk about one demographic in particular. Specifically, the youth demo, the 18-to-34 camp, and why it's more important for all local stations, including Fox 25, to court them now than it's ever been. Because if the local news is going to be part of our community fabric, if it's going to be as important as it was 20 or 30 years ago, when it was one of the loudest (not to mention one of the only) voices in town—if it doesn't want to go the way of the increasingly irrelevant network TV news and the daily newspapers that are hemorrhaging circulation (and staff)—it needs to do a better job of getting young people to tune in.

Right now, they're tuning out. When you combine the viewers of both of Boston's 10 p.m. and all three 11 p.m. broadcasts over a one-month stretch, only about one in six is under 35, according to the Nielsen Media Research ratings company.

"Television news has always skewed older. Always," says WHDH-TV, Channel 7 general manager Mike Carson. "It's never been watched heavily by young people. But that's even truer today. I attribute that to the Internet and information age. There are just so many ways for people to get their news now.

"It is a very gradual siphoning of viewers from the universe. There's not too much we can do about it except try to do the best newscast we can and try to attract viewers however we can. But even with some erosion going on, it's still the best medium, the most dynamic and compelling, to reach people. You can still reach more than print or radio—it's just getting smaller."

There is any number of reasons why the local news has never been a favorite among young people, not the least of which is that they don't tend to be home at 6 or 11 or, if they are, they're not watching the local news—they're tuned to *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* or something equally fresh. Still, general managers and news directors always assumed that their ratings and

demographics would remain constant because as the 18-to-34s got older, they'd begin to tune in. After all, you can't stay 18 to 34 forever. It made sense for a long time because it always had worked out that way. It made sense because, for decades, the local stations were the biggest players around. It made sense until now.

What Carson and some others fear is happening today—what has them worried—is that fewer and fewer young people are graduating to becoming viewers. Much like the tobacco companies, the local news needs to hook people while they're young. But maybe the old conventional thinking isn't logical any longer. Maybe, because there are so many other means of getting news, from the Internet to cable, they won't ever watch the locals. And if they don't graduate, if they don't watch, what will that mean for traditional newscasts?

"I think a concern that all broadcasting has is, how do we emerge as the landscape changes?" Kelley says. "I think we have to create a product that is uniquely local. That's what we've tried to do here."

It might not be that simple anymore.

Everyone has numbers, and everyone has spin. But none of the local stations can claim a huge percentage of late-news viewers under 35. Not one can consistently declare that even 35 percent of its late-news viewers are in that group. According to Nielsen, Fox 25 does the best, at just under 30 percent of viewers who are 34 or younger. At the other end of the spectrum, WHDH-TV, Channel 7; WBZ-TV, Channel 4; WLVI-TV, Channel 56; and WCVB-TV, Channel 5 have all fallen below 20 percent. Worse: More than half of the late-news viewers of Channels 4, 5, and 7 are 50 or older.

You don't need numbers to believe that losing younger viewers could be a problem for the local news; a rudimentary sociological observation reaches the same conclusion. Precious few of my friends—a group that is almost exclusively in its late 20s or early 30s—watch the local news. Neither do I. We're not indifferent or distracted; the opposite is true, actually. We're news junkies, constantly in need. And like any good junkies, we don't like when it's hard to score. Who needs a dealer with availability issues, who only peddles his wares at 5, 6, 10, and 11? No need to wait when you can get your fix *right now*, on your BlackBerry, podcasts, blogs, and omnipresent cable news. That's what local newscasts are up against: quicker delivery systems. Before too long, someone is going to invent a gadget that will mainline breaking news into your eyeball, and I'll probably buy it.

Just like newspapers and magazines and radio before it, traditional television is coming to understand a cold reality: New technology is a bitch.

"Older viewers are creatures of habit; I was always used to getting my local news at 6, network at 6:30, and the evening news at 11," says Cathy Perron, director of Boston University's television management program. "Younger viewers aren't into that habit. Since they've started viewing, they've had so many other choices. The information has been disseminated to them in a much different way. If they want to get news, whenever they want it, they know how to get it."

This isn't to say that local news is dead. No one—not Perron or Kelley or Carson—no one thinks that local news will fade away completely. Still, the myriad news distribution options now available could very well loosen the communal grip that local news has long had on Boston. (To some extent, that's already happened. Ten years ago, Channel 5 could claim that 21 percent of all Bostonians watching television at 11 p.m. in a given month were tuned to its newscast. In the same month a decade later, its share had dropped to 13 percent. Channel 4 and Channel 7 have also seen their shares drop.) All of which means the local news is going to have to do something it's never done. It's going to have to change.

"The challenge is definitely breathing some life into a format that's become somewhat moribund," says Alan Schroeder, an

associate professor at Northeastern who teaches a television news course. "The basic structure of the half-hour newscast hasn't changed in 20 or 30 years. It's still two segments of news, a segment of sports, a segment of weather, and a feature segment at the end. The format itself hasn't kept up with the demand of the audience. It seems to me that there's a big opportunity for someone who can figure out what the next incarnation of the news will be in terms of formatting. But I think that they're a little reluctant to innovate because they're comfortable with the current structure, and the current structure is so entrenched that it will take some fairly radical thinking."

The issue, then, is really one of evolution and significance. How do the local news broadcasts get younger viewers? How do they deliver the news in a way that isn't homogenous, that doesn't invite comparisons to caricatures like Ron Burgundy or Kent Brockman?

"I do believe you can attract younger viewers if you are promoting your newscast during programs when a younger audience is available," Perron says. "If you're promoting, in particular, a feature that's of importance to a younger viewer, that can attract them and keep them interested in the news."

The local stations are moving toward that. They are all, to one extent or another, still dependent upon lead-in network prime-time programs. But general managers and news directors can fool with the age and charisma of their anchors and reporters, the length of stories, and what those stories are about. It's why Fox 25 will run a package about iPods in the newscast that follows *The OC* (or, alternatively, a medical story after *House*).

It's why Channel 5 has a feature called "The Click"—a spot about what's happening on the Internet, delivered by an attractive, young female reporter named Jamy Pombo. It's why Channel 4 redesigned its website to offer live five-minute broadcasts, streaming video, and real-time weather and traffic information. They're all trying to appeal to younger viewers.

A good deal of attention is now paid not only to producing the local newscasts, but to promoting them. Marketing the programs has become almost as important as the programs themselves.

"The amount of promotion is constant," says Jim Thistle, a former news director at Channels 4, 5, and 7 who is now director of the broadcast journalism program at BU. "It's 'When we come back—this, this, this, and this.' Promotion is way, way up from what it was 10 or 15 years ago. It's all weather and breaking news now. I joke, but if someone falls down, an old lady, and there's a helicopter around, it'll be breaking news on someone's channel. Quick stuff. The amount of time given to news promotion is almost as long as the package itself now."

More time promoting, more selling, but less meat. It's the fast-food approach to the news: cheap and familiar, but not entirely palatable. Which means—as Schroeder says—that there's a big opportunity out there for someone with an original thought. "Right now, if they didn't the little number on the screen, you really wouldn't know which was which in terms of stories, what they lead with, how they present it," Schroeder says. "This thing of, just add more graphics or build a new set or hire a new anchorperson, those seem to be stopgap measures that address symptoms instead of the root cause. The reality is, you can't just keep doing the same thing night after night after night, ad infinitum, and expect the audience to stay with you."