

FREE SPEECH

Brickbats to House members who voted to extend the Patriot Act, which – both in its symbolism and its actual provisions – is a profoundly un-American document. Not surprisingly, most of our local representatives here in the Seven Cities went along with the majority. Kudos to Bobby Scott for refusing to do so. Unfortunately, he and his fellow dissenters couldn't muster enough support to kill the thing.

A bouquet to Senator John McCain for successfully pushing his proposal to ban cruel and inhuman treatment of detainees in the "war on terror." Although Congress has overwhelmingly supported the ban for weeks, the White House didn't endorse it until last Thursday. That this was ever in question is astonishing. After all, McCain knows a tad more about torture than the two guys in the White House. You'll recall that they had "other priorities" during the Vietnam War. No matter. It's one more defeat for chickenhawks, and that's what counts.

FOX FIRES BACK

YOUR RECENT MEDIA WATCH column, "A Modest Proposal," was fantastically naïve, misinformed, and unrealistic (News & Views, Nov. 15). Most troubling, the article was the work of Jeffrey P. Jones' ODU communication students. Students who one day could be employed in a business they apparently do not understand. I could take issue with almost every one of the points, but I will address only the parts that applied to me directly or indirectly.

My weekly franchise "Road Rebels" was referred to as "little more than a stupid stunt." Thankfully, professionals in my field have recognized Road Rebels twice for regional Emmys for excellence in broadcasting. In 10 years producing Road Rebels we have impacted thousands. Most recently, "Road Rebels" successfully convinced the Coast Guard to reconsider "open on demand" bridge lifts at the Dominion Blvd. Steel Bridge. This practice to benefit a few boaters passing through our community delays thousands of commuters in Chesapeake every day. Thirty thousand vehicles cross the bridge daily, and thanks to "Road Rebels," delays at the bridge have drastically been cut.

The students also suggested instead of doing "Road Rebels" my time would be better spent doing "an investigative report or two." In my 20 years of gainful employment in television news, I can assure you I've filed so many investigative reports I can't remember them all. My work has been recognized three times by The Associated Press for outstanding achievement by an individual reporter, and twice by the Hampton Roads Black Media Professionals.

I have absolutely no idea where the ODU students concluded WAVY-TV doesn't pay proper attention to political races. As WAVY's political reporter, I produced profile reports on all statewide candidates, all competitive House of Delegate Races, and my last count was 30 political stories between October 20 and November 10. In my humble opinion, 30 political stories in three weeks is stellar. It's my understanding the students surveyed the 11 p.m. news only from September 19-October 21. Most of my stories ran during the 6 p.m. newscast. If great conclusions are to be made about TV political news coverage, how can you not survey the critical days three weeks out from Election Day during more than just one-day part? In essence, their survey itself is fundamentally flawed.

I might also add, political stories rank low on viewer interest charts, but WAVY commits itself to these stories because we think it is important to do so in the public interest of our community. Incidentally, the sad fact is, people don't care about politics. On November 8, 48

percent of registered voters cast votes for Governor. That means the governor was elected by 25-plus percent of the total population.

The college students are terribly unfair concerning WAVY-TV's Friday Night Flights. I've been part of Friday Night Flights since we began this, and it is an excellent use of resources. By the way, WAVY-TV spends millions of dollars a year bringing our community local news, and how much does it cost you? NOTHING. IT'S FREE. It's also positive. We are blasted so many times for only reporting negative news. Now we're blasted for spending extraordinary amounts of money to report something positive.

The suggestion that we should put political candidates on every evening, or we should broadcast city council meetings, shows the students fundamentally fail to understand the reality of our business. We survive on advertising dollars based primarily on the number of viewers we traditionally bring to a newscast. Eighteen- to 49-year old viewers are thought the best because they tend to spend more money in the marketplace. The suggestions provided by the class would actually drive away viewers from the newscast. TV is best when we take you to the scene. When we make you cry. Make you laugh. Make you think. Make you mad. Only TV can accomplish that with compelling consistency. Hampton Roads is blessed with two major newspapers. *The Daily Press* and *The Virginian Pilot*, along with several smaller papers, will give you the intricate details of a story we can't due to time realities of TV news. WAVY-TV gives you the immediacy of a story with the two or three major elements of a story. We also give you the compelling visual elements newspaper can't.

I am proud of what I do every day. There are flaws in our business as with any business. I'm certainly flawed. However, at the end of the day, when I go to bed I know I told the truth. You don't know how comforting that is. At the end of the article, a question was asked, "Andy Fox: Is his time put to good use?" Answer: You're damn right it is.

**Andy Fox
Reporter/Anchor
WAVY**

JEFFREY JONES RESPONDS: *Our class examined a month of coverage of local television news during the 11 p.m. broadcasts, and found a dearth of political coverage (two percent of all stories broadcast across the three stations). We now see, thanks to Mr. Fox, that our primary mistake was watching the news at the wrong time. He is obviously admitting that the 11 p.m. news is less informative than other broadcasts.*

Or is he suggesting that informing the

citizenry about politics is only important during the week prior to or immediately following an election (but the rest of the time, don't bother your little minds with such matters)? For the week of September 26-30 (six weeks prior to the election), for instance, WAVY ran a total of four—count them, four—political stories, all national or international in scope, with not a single story focused on state or local politics or the elections. And that particular week provided the most political coverage (totaling 8 percent of all stories broadcast) from WAVY for the month of our study, running from September 19-October 21. So much for making us laugh, cry, get angry, or even think about the serious issues that we as Virginians face.

What his response foregrounds, however, is that viewers who watch at 11 p.m. are only being fed the same type of violent and sensational schlock that the network dishes out during prime time. Our class found that 71 percent of WAVY's stories for an entire week (Sept. 19-23) were crime, death, destruction, and mayhem. Is it possible that WAVY doesn't want to interrupt the flow of entertainment programming, bringing viewers down from their buzz by reminding them of political reality? Best keep viewers on edge so they feel the need to laugh it all away with Leno at 11:30.

As for Mr. Fox taking personal offense to our characterizing his award-winning work as a stupid stunt, "Road Rebels" is the quintessential example of how far local TV news stations will go to not just report spectacle events. There's good reason why television critic Larry Bonko calls Fox's report "the most entertaining feature on local TV"—because it isn't news, it's pure entertainment. The joke is that Mr. Fox now has the gumption to call this "a public service."

Public service broadcasting treats viewers as citizens, not just consumers to be sold to advertisers. The type of reporting that comes out of that model is one that empowers citizens themselves to make changes in their communities. It helps citizens understand where power lies, what problems exist, and then emboldens them with the knowledge to fight for change. A public service broadcast would ask why we have these transportation problems in the first place, and what can be done about them at a policy level. And that type of reporting can be done while the station still turns a profit.

Mr. Fox, on the other hand, works from the minor celebrity-Uber Reporter model, where the viewer-consumer's only job is to tune in every Thursday at 5:30 to passively watch Mr. Fox single-handedly transform the world, one dangerous driver at a time! That is, all the real citizens who know exactly when to watch such important, public interest reporting. The rest of you watching at 11—go back to sleep.