

"People have been wondering, is it going to happen? I'm just glad to see it coming to a close." — City Councilman Anthony L. Burfoot on the recent decision to construct a 20-to 25-story Hilton luxury hotel in downtown Norfolk.

"We thought, 'Well, just go ahead and put it in a little envelope and overnight it.'" — Mark A. Reed, Virginia Beach Historic Resources Coordinator, joking about the City's underestimating the logistics involved in transporting an original copy of the *Magna Carta* for possible display at the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia in 2007.

"We wish they'd think about joint custody, but we understand." — Judy Pedersen, of the Fairfax County Park Authority on the decision, granted by the president, to move "pardoned" turkeys from farms to Disneyland.

"If you don't, I promise you the network will just put another comedy show in this time slot. Then you'll be sorry." — Recently "retired" ABC *Nightline* Anchor Ted Koppel on audiences' acceptance of his successors, responding to a previous incident when David Letterman was slated to take over his *Nightline* slot.

"I got the new Apple Tic-Tac. It freshens your breath and plays one song." — Comedian Cedric the Entertainer at the American Music Awards on the influx of all things iPod.

WORD for WORD

MEDIAWATCH

A Modest Proposal

How to Fix TV News in Five Easy Steps

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FOR THE LAST FEW WEEKS, students in my Critical Analysis of Journalism class at ODU have reported results from our study of local television news. Not surprisingly, we found the broadcasts to be overly sensational, with a heavy emphasis on violence, crime, destruction, and disasters, as well as a reliance on tantalizing video footage despite the lack of connection to the local area. The monitored broadcasts were also bereft of political coverage, despite the fact that our study was conducted in the two months prior to Election Day.

Our study corroborates other examinations of local television news, conducted over the last decade in Philadelphia, Chicago, Denver and other metro areas. It seems that our local news operates under the same constraints and imperatives that often determine the quality of reporting elsewhere.

Among the problems:

- Small reporting staffs make it difficult for stations to assign reporters to specific "beats" in the way that newspapers do. As a result, there is less in-depth and sustained coverage of politics, the environment and other important subjects.

- Nightly deadlines force reporters to resort to shortcuts or thin reporting.

- Local stations find it easier to "fill-out" their broadcasts with highly arresting video footage available rather inexpensively from news agencies or the networks.

- Stations seek as many viewers as possible and therefore tend to appeal to the lowest common denominator, believing that stories that emphasize drama and emotion are most effective.

- Stations use satellite up-links to deliver "live" reporting, yet seldom does the technology serve to make the reports more immediate or meaningful.

With these constraints in mind, we want to conclude our series by offering recommendations that are both realistic and achievable. These proposals can be implemented without incurring additional costs, while retaining audience appeal. We understand that broadcast stations must make a profit, and the economic bottom line is ultimately their first and foremost concern. Nevertheless, we believe that these changes would produce an immediate impact on

the quality of local reporting, thereby offering information that could make viewers better citizens or build a stronger, more vibrant community.

1. Refocus resources: News stations currently engage in two activities that offer little in the way of value. One is assigning reporters to cover stories that amount to little more than stupid stunts. For instance, instead of assigning Andy Fox to chase down drivers who violate passenger quotas in HOV lanes, why not use his time for an investigative report or two? And instead of assigning a reporter to schlep around town to locate the cheapest gas, why not use this time to pay regular visits to city council meetings in the area? The excuse that reporters don't have time for in-depth reporting is belied by these and other banal stunts that all stations engage in.

A second misplacement of resources is the usage of satellite up-link time for meaningless "live" reports (perhaps parodied best by *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*). Instead, stations should drive the satellite van to Richmond every once in a while to report on state government. And how can they pay for this? Well, they can begin by eliminating self-promotional gimmicks such as the enormous expense of financing helicopter flights into local high school football stadiums, such as "Friday Night Flights." Other examples abound.

2. Improve Political Coverage: As our reports have shown, only two percent of stories are dedicated to politics, despite the fact that as recipients of an FCC broadcast license, stations are supposed to serve the "public interest." Furthermore, if broadcasters are to benefit economically from the enormous sums of money that political candidates spend in purchasing airtime for advertisements on their stations during an election year, broadcasters should specifically designate some of those "atypical" revenues to more political reporting.

Specifically, stations should consider interviewing one candidate per evening. Political candidates will do almost anything for free airtime, and hence, will come to the local studio for an interview if it means communicating with local voters. And since political decisions affect everyone, the reports can still retain alarmist "lowest common denominator" rhetorical framing for issues such as taxes, transportation, and the environment (the way stations now do over, say, malfunctioning toilet seats).

Another suggestion is to provide special "Meet Your Representative" reports: Just

Increased coverage of the arts (broadly defined) could be a tool for increasing advertising revenue, while simultaneously providing the type of visual reports that news operations prefer.

as Representative Thelma Drake regularly calls a local talk radio show to discuss politics in Washington, stations should routinely talk with our state delegates and senators. Since these individuals live in the area, routine chats would not impose financial burdens associated with travel. Perhaps representatives could answer questions posed by viewers (via e-mail or phone calls), thereby increasing viewer connection to a specific station. Or perhaps representatives could report on legislation they currently support or oppose.

3. Spotlight Municipalities: The shortage of meaningful reporting on life or politics in each of the Seven Cities is appalling. More often than not, a city receives attention when a scandal or violent crime has occurred. Stations tend to justify the lack of coverage by noting that they can't afford a news staff large enough to cover the scope of a metropolitan area such as this.

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