



Content Analysis:

The Fear and Fluff of LA's Nightly Local News



September 2006

Prepared by volunteers of Take Back Your News
in association with California Common Cause.

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Executive Summary

What type of news gets covered in Los Angeles on local television newscasts? And how much of it is even local? To answer these and many other questions, a media reform group associated with California Common Cause¹ monitored the local Los Angeles late-night television news broadcasts for a snapshot of news content.

The project's objectives were twofold: track meaningful local content in television newscasts that enables citizens to be informed participants in our democracy and understand media ownership and its effect on the local Los Angeles television market.

Key findings include:

- 45% of the news was **fear and fluff** (defined as crime, Hollywood and human interest stories).
- The number of **non-local** crime and human-interest stories exceed the total number of government stories.
- Stations owned by the same company (KCBS and KCAL), **overwhelmingly share fear and fluff stories** (36 percent) but only 2 percent of government stories.

Prepared by concerned citizens and local media activists in association with California Common Cause, this report calls attention to the problems of consolidated media as well as lax enforcement by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) of the obligation that television broadcasters accept to serve the public interest.

Background

Trustees of the public airwaves

Since 1927 broadcast stations have operated as public trustees. They are granted free licenses by the government to use a portion of our publicly-owned airwaves, and in return they pledge to serve the public interest. This arrangement was first codified into law by the Radio Act of 1927, and has been the law of the land for nearly a century.

This trusteeship model was designed to make best use of the limited amount of broadcast spectrum—preventing interference and ensuring a diversity of voices on the airwaves over which broadcast stations send their signals. To oversee licensees—including monitoring and enforcing public interest standards—the FCC was established.

The FCC developed guidelines and rules requiring stations to devote airtime to opposing views on controversial matters of public interest. These policies were formally adopted as the Fairness Doctrine in 1949.

After a battle in the 1980s, Congress passed the Fairness Doctrine into law. However President Reagan quickly vetoed it. Since that time, there have been no clear standards of rules establishing how broadcasters must serve the public interest.

¹Common Cause is a nonpartisan nonprofit advocacy organization founded in 1970 as a vehicle for citizens to make their voices heard in the political process and to hold their leaders accountable to the public interest. Now with nearly 300,000 members and supporters and 38 state organizations, Common Cause remains committed to honest, open and accountable government, as well as encouraging citizen participation in democracy.

Ten years ago, Congress passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996—ushering in an era of less regulation intended to foster competition, reduce consumer prices and increase diversity of viewpoints. However, the bill did just the opposite and led to massive consolidation in the radio industry.

While facing stiff competition from cable and online outlets, broadcast television still retains its powerful hold as the top choice for consumer news. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 59 percent of Americans rely on local television for their news. That's compared with 42 percent who turn to newspapers, 38 percent who use cable television and 29 percent who use online sources.

Yet today, the FCC has no effective mechanism for enforcing or ensuring stations follow any kind of fairness or public interest standard. Without any guidance, each station determines for itself how it will fulfill its public obligation. And for many it seems that profit considerations trump the public interest.

Changing ownership: media conglomerates

In June 2003 the FCC approved new media ownership rules to conform with the expressed interests of corporate media conglomerates. In response, more than three million people contacted Congress and the FCC in protest. While Washington D.C. Beltway insiders and media executives were likely surprised by the robust public outcry, it is important to remember that by 2003, media holdings had been consolidated in such ways that could be characterized as antithetical to the mandate that broadcast media serve the public interest.

The following constitutes a sample of what U.S. media looked like when the FCC voted to amend a number of its media ownership rules:

- The top broadcast networks (garnering 70 percent of the prime time television market share) and the highest rated cable channels were controlled by just five media conglomerates that also possessed vast holdings in radio, publishing, film/television studios, music companies and Web sites.

- Oligopolies had market control in nearly every media market. In most cities, four or fewer firms controlled at least 70 percent of the market share. In a majority of cases, these oligopolies included one or more of the dominant national players. This, in concert with the 1984 FCC decision to eliminate regulations for news and public affairs programming, led to a loss of localism.

- Between 1995 and 2003, the number of companies owning commercial television stations declined by 40 percent.

- In the 2002 general election, local television stations earned more than one billion dollars from political advertising. In the weeks before Election Day, most local and national TV news broadcasts featured more political ads than election-related stories.

- The FCC’s own research found that the typical profit margin for a local television station is around 40 percent—four to five times higher than the typical Fortune 500 company.

In a 3-2 party line vote (with Democratic Commissioners Michael J. Copps and Jonathan Adelstein in dissent) the FCC 2002 Biennial Review Order² was adopted in June 2003. Key rule changes impacting television broadcasting and newspapers included:

- An increase in the number of television stations one company can own, lifting the broadcast cap from 35 percent of the national television audience to 45 percent of that audience;
- Cross-ownership allowed between television stations and newspapers in the same market, except in markets with three or fewer television stations;
- Duopolies (2 companies monopolizing media ownership) if the designated market area (DMA) has 17 or more TV stations, but only one of the two stations can be among the top four in ratings. Both commercial and non-commercial stations are counted;
- Triopolies (3 companies) if the DMA has 18 or more TV stations, but only one of the three stations can be among the top four in ratings.

Public interest advocates challenged the rules in court, and won a major victory when the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the FCC had based its rules on faulty reasoning. The court ordered the FCC to go back to the drawing board, which brings us to today. The FCC is now considering relaxing media ownership limits, and is seeking public input on how local media are serving (or not serving) the needs of citizens.

The local TV landscape today

Currently in Los Angeles, there are 29 TV stations. Of those, 11 or 34 percent are major commercial (English and Spanish) TV stations. The breakdown is:

- Two are owned by Univision (KMEX-24, KFTR-46)
- Three are owned by General Electric (KNBC-4, KVEA-52, KWHY-22)
- Two are owned by Viacom (KCBS-2, KCAL-9)
- Two are owned by News Corp (KCOP-13, KTTV-11)
- One is owned by Disney (KABC-7)
- One is owned by Tribune (KTLA-5) Note: Tribune also owns the Los Angeles Times.

Nationally, these six companies own 224 stations—controlling 75% of all prime-time viewing:

1. News Corporation Limited. (Fox Entertainment Group Inc.)	37	\$2,435,850
2. CBS Television Network (Viacom Inc.)	41	\$2,000,550
3. NBC Universal Inc. (General Electric Co.)	44	\$1,944,450
4. Tribune Co.	30	\$1,328,900
5. ABC Inc. (Walt Disney Co.)	10	\$1,247,925
9. Univision	62	\$670,100

* Source: BIA Financial Network Inc., 2004 estimated revenues, 4/2005

² Section 202(h) of the Telecommunications Reform Act mandates that the FCC periodically review its broadcast ownership rules to determine “whether any such rules are necessary in the public interest as a result of competition.”

Study Methods

Part one of the project involved station visits, conducted with station managers or their representatives to allow stations an opportunity to represent their public interest activities.

The second part involved monitoring the news of most of the major commercial, English-language stations' late-evening (chosen because this is considered to be the most-watched) news. News was monitored at 10 pm for KTLA-5, KCAL-9, and KTTV-11 and at 11 pm for KCBS-2, KNBC-4 and KABC-7.

Station Visits

Beginning in late 2005, California Common Cause attempted to meet with the major English-language commercial station managers. The main objective was to find out how they view their public service commitment and what specific steps they take to achieve it. A secondary objective also involved reviewing the station's FCC-mandated public file, specifically for ad revenue generated from political advertising. Though only required to keep ad revenue from candidates (they are entitled to discounted pricing for ad time), political parties and outside groups whose ads address national legislative issues, some stations do keep records on ballot initiative advertising as well.

Stations are also required by the FCC to keep content records of their public affairs programming. While some stations were better than others at record keeping, these records note length of coverage, date and topic content.

While most stations we interviewed offer public affairs programming, albeit at off-peak times like 6 am on Sunday, many stations also reported their support of local charities as part of their public service commitment. Here are the results of each of the stations visited:

KCBS/KCAL (Viacom)

Date: Thursday, January 12, 2006

Station Representative: Stephanie Medina Rodriguez, director of public affairs

Overall

The station feels its public service commitment has to do with aiding non-profits such as giving free airtime about an upcoming fund-raiser or actually sponsoring the event.

Public Files

The political ad revenue pages were very difficult to read (overlapping dates, numbers scratched out, etc), making it nearly impossible to glean really useful information other than to make rough approximations about how much money is earned from political advertising.

Revenue from 2005 LA mayoral campaign:

- a. KCBS \$1,863,823 (Hahn, \$716,862; Villaraigosa, \$853,931; Alarcon, \$66,020; Hertzberg, \$194,310; Parks, \$32,700)
- b. KCAL \$770,778 (Hahn, \$82,261; Villaraigosa, \$442,717; Hertzberg, \$193,800; Parks, \$19,450; Alarcon, \$32,550)

Revenue from Boxer Campaign 2004: KCBS \$625,140

Content Coverage

The political section of KCAL's content files from October 13 to November 9, 2005 list 16 instances where special election related issues were covered. The total time spent on election stories was approximately 35 minutes with each individual segment ranging from 30 seconds to just under 5 minutes. The average time spent on a story was 2 minutes and 18 seconds.

The political section of KCBS's content files from October 10 to November 9, 2005 list 19 segments related to the special election. A total of approximately 25 minutes was spent on the special election. The shortest segment was 21 seconds and the longest was 2 minutes and 22 seconds. The average time spent on a segment was 1 minute and 35 seconds.

KABC (Disney)

Date: Wednesday, January 18, 2006

Station Representative: Arnie Kleiner, general manager.

Overall

KABC seems to take its public service commitment very seriously. The station manager as well as three top-level executives were in attendance at our meeting, which went a long way toward showing the seriousness with which they take our concerns.

Public File

KABC maintains highly detailed public files.

Total ad revenue from 2005 special election: \$15,091,070

Content Coverage

Here's a brief list of ongoing public service content they provided as evidence of their commitment to the community:

- Dedicated reporter in Sacramento covering state politics.
- Newsmakers show (once a month), Sundays at 11am (rerun at 6 pm).
- 40 ½ hours of news coverage per week including 6 hours on Sunday.
- Vista LA—focused on Latinos, Sundays at 11:30 am.
- Cool Kids.
- ABC7 Listens-Town Hall style meetings every other month to get community feedback.
- Once a quarter they donate one hour to Childrens Hospital LA and the Urban League (allowing them to sell their own ad space and use revenue as a fund-raiser).
- Community Affairs ongoing [Diabetes Awareness, Safe Summer (CPR and Red Cross), Foodbank with Foothill Unity Center, Susan Komen Breast Cancer Walk, etc.].
- Co-produce public affairs programs with LA36.

KTLA (Tribune)

Date: Tuesday, January 31, 2006

Station Representative: Vinnie Malcolm, general manager.

Overall

KTLA says its slogan “Where LA lives” sums up its public service commitment.

Public File

- Extensive 2006 files for Rose Bowl Parade—all viewer letters.
- Maintains viewer mail back to 2003.
- Public Service Announcements or PSAs for 4th Quarter 2005 organized by date, time and length. Sample list included: Smokey The Bear, American Dental Association, Arbor Day Foundation, Boy Scouts of America, California State Parks, KTLA’s own Kid’s Day LA, Los Angeles Public Library, Para Los Niños.
- KTLA donated \$224,000 to children’s charities.

Total ad revenue from 2005 special election: \$2,863,780 (all figures NET)

Content Coverage

- Two ½ hour programs, PaceSetters and Making It, appear on Sunday mornings at 6 am and 6:30 am, respectively.
- LA police chief and mayor appear every month as part of news.
- Other news stories amounting to another 30-45 minutes per week according to station estimates.

Remaining list of public service commitment included covering the Rose Parade, the Hollywood Christmas Parade and Kids Day LA.

KNBC, KVEA, KWHY (GE)

Date: Wednesday, February 22, 2006

Station Representative: David Bright, research director KNBC; Victor Franco, vice president of community affairs and media relations KVEA and KWHY.

Overall

KNBC’s public file was incomplete. And KVEA and KWHY, both Spanish language stations, had disorganized files that did not allow for observers to investigate.

Public File

In terms of ad revenue kept, we were told they were just being nice by keeping ad revenue on some of the propositions. Only those deemed to have national significance are kept although no one seemed to know who decides what is national significance (given that all propositions were state issues).

Partial ad revenue for KNBC from the 2005 special election: \$12,148,500

Partial ad revenue for KWHY from the 2005 special election: \$100,195

Partial ad revenue for KVEA from the 2005 special election: \$419,335

KTTV (FOX)

The station’s public file was not reviewed nor was a meeting conducted with any station representative. The station sent us a letter informing us that if we wished to know more about their public service commitment that we should watch their news and refused to meet with us.

News Monitoring

Three weeks of monitoring were conducted March 19-25, April 23-29 and May 30-June 5, 2006. Each station was monitored to categorize the news stories by content type and origin, such as local, state, out-of-state, national and international. Any news story that covered more than one subject was categorized by the main subject of the story. Similarly, any news story that addressed more than one level of geographic scope was categorized by the main geographic scope of the story. The out-of-state category included stories outside of California but with clear non-national significance. This category was largely dominated by crime and human-interest stories as well as car chases.

Subject categories were chosen in advance of the monitoring based on what types of stories we anticipated viewing. Designated weather and sports segments were not included as part of the monitoring. During the project, some categories were added, consolidated or deleted. After a trial viewing during sweeps week in February, three full weeks of monitoring took place.

After each monitoring session, observers met to review stories and ensure that stories were being uniformly coded.

Terminology

Defining the primary subject categories

The top-ranked categories reveal news that is heavily weighted toward fear and fluff. Fear is defined by crime stories. Fluff is defined by Hollywood and human-interest stories.

While other categories such as lifestyles did contain fluff stories, the group focused on categories with the most number of stories—including the government category. This category was also selected for more likely having content that helps viewers be informed participants in our democracy. Definitions for the primary subject categories are:

Crime: Reports about alleged criminal or violent activity, the acts of law enforcement in response to that activity and the follow-up or current status of alleged victims or perpetrators.

Human Interest: Reports about people, animals, events and occurrences that are shown to raise any number of emotional responses from viewers but convey little, if any, useful information.

Hollywood: Reports about celebrities and public figures not acting in any official capacity.

Government: Reports about governmental acts or plans, including the acts, speeches and comments of government officials in their official capacities as well as the acts, speeches and comments of candidates running for office.

Secondary content categories

Many of the categories were either sparsely covered or not the focus of this report. These definitions include:

Local Interest: Reports about local events and occurrences to inform viewers about what is happening in particular communities, but which do not fall into other categories.

Foreign Affairs: Stories about foreign governments. Ex: Election coverage in Peru.

War: Iraq, Afghanistan, Mideast crisis

Car Chase: Police in pursuit of a car

Self Promotion: Advertising masquerading as news. Ex. Preview of Geraldo at Large or American Idol's Randy Jackson does an Oreo commercial.

Lifestyles: Way of life stories. Ex: Exercise class in stilettos, teen sex up in June

Sports as news: Sports-related items outside sports segment. Ex: World Cup ads

Weather as news: Weather-related items outside regular weather segment. Ex: Heat in Los Angeles, how to stay cool

Disasters/Fires: Human loss and suffering either from natural or man-made factors. Ex: house fires, hurricanes, earthquakes.

Education: Focus on schools, learning. Ex: Literacy promotion in LA County.

Health: Focus on health issues. Ex: HIV prevention, breast cancer awareness

Homeland Security: Terrorism, border control. Ex: National Guard ordered to border.

Traffic/Crashes: Car wrecks, plane crashes. Ex: Plane hits SUV, pilot survives.

Consumer: News about gas prices, inflation, business. Ex: Prius recall.

Civic Action: Protests, free speech. Ex: Immigration rallies.

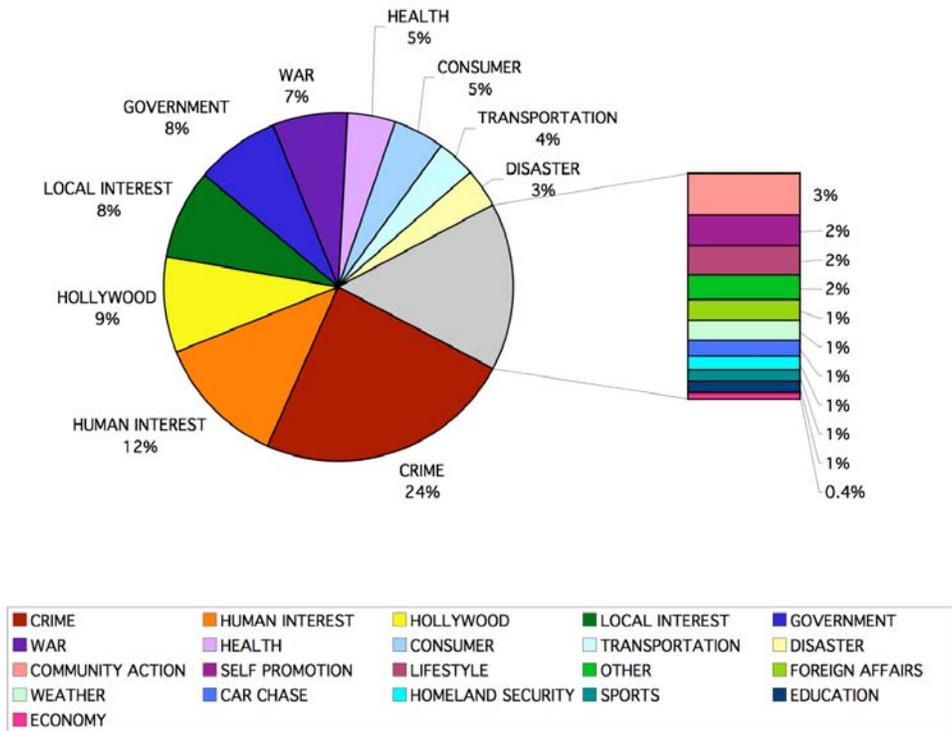
Other: Things that just don't fit into any category. Ex: Building implosions.

Results of the Monitoring

Section 1—Coding the news broadcasts

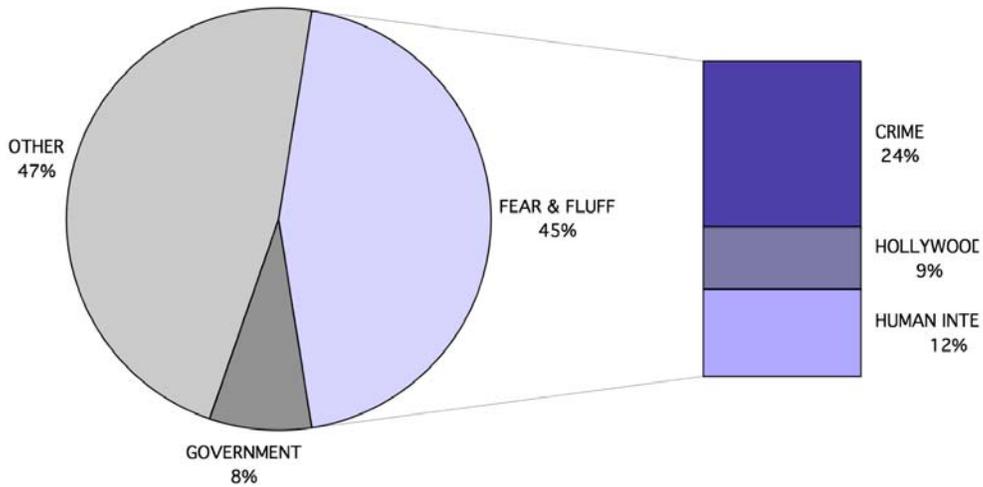
To compile figures for this report, the group focused on the most-reported stories. While the Local Interest category arguably makes a relative high appearance in the overall standings, the focus of this report is government and news content that increases a person’s ability to contribute to our democracy. Unless otherwise noted, figures represent an aggregate number for all stations monitored, reflected as percentages (rounded to the nearest whole numbers) of the total.

What was covered?



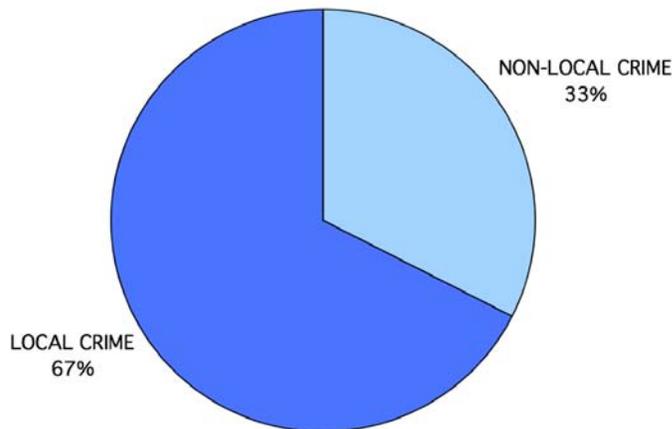
>> Los Angeles news is dominated by fear. Crime was by far the number one story reported.

Fear/Fluff versus Government Stories



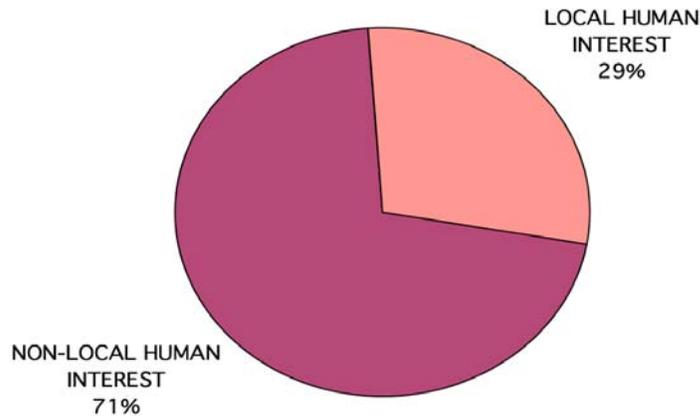
>> 45% of all news reported fell into the fear/fluff category (defined as Crime, Human Interest and Hollywood). In contrast, just 8% of news reported was about government—58% of that being local. Some categories like Self Promotion (2%) and Lifestyles (2%) also included fluff stories. Adding them to the general fear/fluff category would take its portion of the news to nearly 50%.

Total Crime Stories (Percent of local versus non-local)

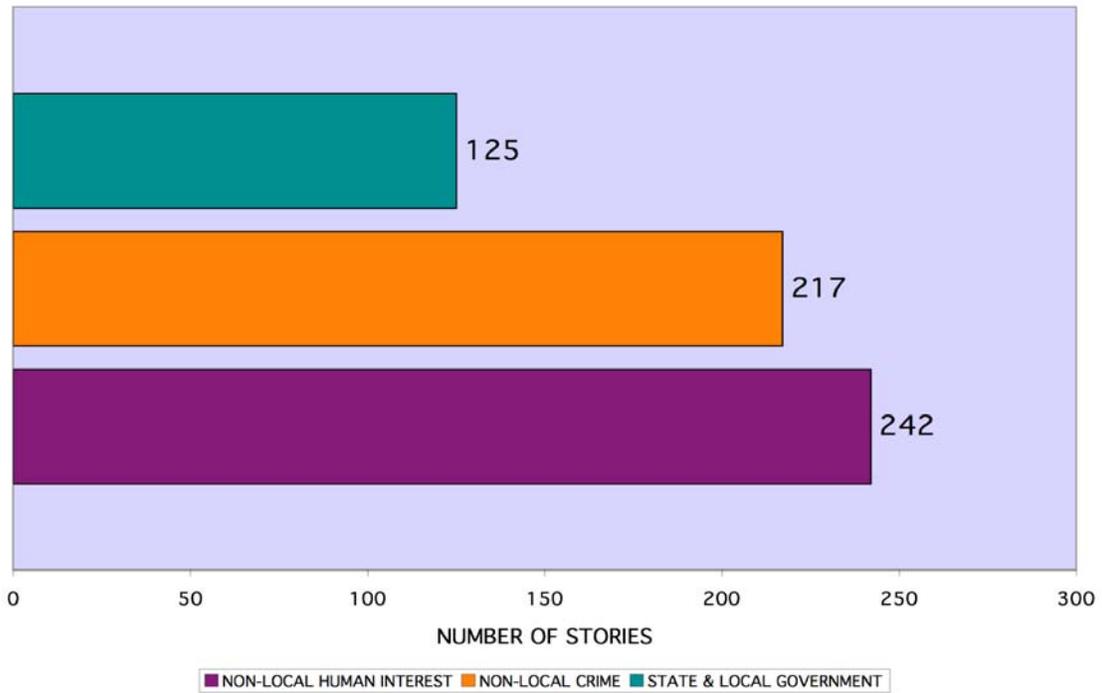


>> While a majority of crime stories reported were local, fully 1/3 of all crime reports was in other states—aired because they were easily and cheaply obtained off the wires or simply for shock value.

Total Human-Interest Stories (Percent of local versus non-local)



Total Government Stories versus Non-local Crime and Human-interest Stories



>> Sadly, there are more stories about crime and human interest that don't even take place in Los Angeles that get reported than the total number of state and local government stories.

Section 2—Sample content

News from the Wires

While local crime stories arguably may contain some news value (for example, a hit and run that ties up traffic or serial robberies in a specific neighborhood), crime overwhelmingly dominates the news coverage.

During the monitoring, observers noted many similar stories across most or all of the stations. The common theme was often access to available video footage. Many out-of-state crime and human-interest stories seemed to have been run simply because video was available quickly and inexpensively from wire sources.

The “fear” of nightly news

Examples from actual stories reported on Los Angeles newscasts:

- A surveillance camera filmed a man aiming a gun at the head of a cashier in a Florida sandwich shop and then pulling the trigger without the gun firing.
- Seven people in an Indianapolis home were shot to death execution style.
- A surveillance camera in a liquor store in Texas filmed a burglar fall through the roof.
- A kid in Ohio was shot and killed for walking on his neighbor’s lawn.
- Sex charges against a teacher in Florida were reportedly dropped.
- In Tennessee, a woman was charged for killing her husband who was a pastor in a church.
- In Miami, a hit and run accident was reported.
- A man who crossed police tape in Miami was tasered by police.
- A shooting plot was foiled at a Kansas high school.
- An attack was videotaped in Las Vegas.

The “fluff” of nightly news

Examples from actual stories reported on Los Angeles newscasts:

- A man caught a 51-pound carp in Wisconsin with a bow and arrow.
- In Nevada, two cloned mules raced against several naturally-bred mules.
- A fashion show in NYC to promote Wishbone salad spritzers featured models wearing fruits and vegetables.
- Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante plans to lose 50 pounds.
- Musician Prince rented a West Hollywood mansion from an NBA star and made purple alterations.
- A beaver blocked traffic in Baltimore.
- A decorated golf cart once owned by Michael Douglas was up for a charity auction.
- Former model Anna Nicole Smith announced on her website that she’s pregnant.
- A Florida woman who sold a grilled cheese sandwich, which she claimed had the image of the Virgin Mary, had it tattooed on her breast.
- A report on a singing cab driver in Singapore.
- A moose on the loose in Washington.
- Anchor/host Katie Couric said goodbye to the Today show.
- Randy Jackson of American Idol did an Oreo commercial.

Section 3—Cross-ownership data

KCBS and KCAL comparison

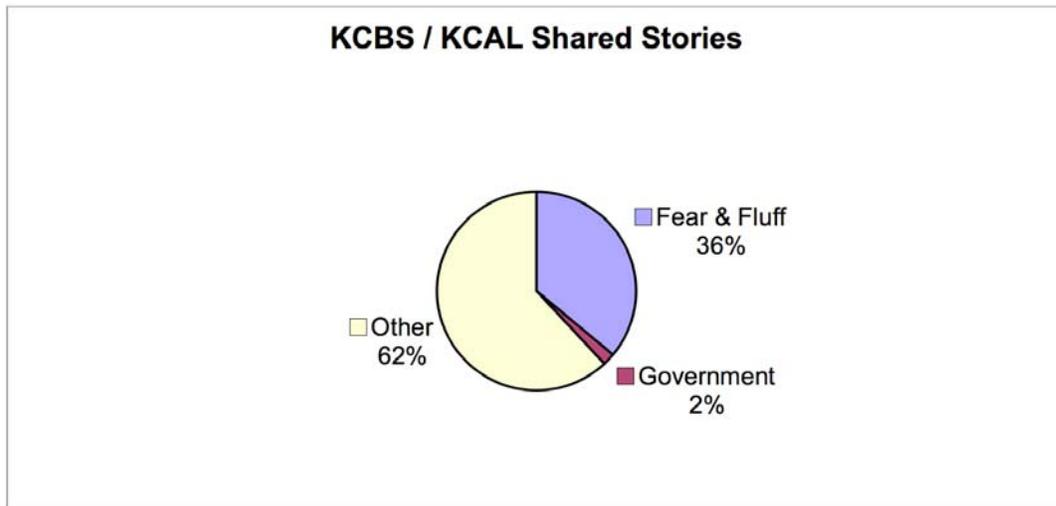
Viacom owns two TV stations in Los Angeles: KCAL and KCBS, which were also observed for content similarity. Before they merged, each used to have their own separate investigative, community affairs and consumer affairs departments. After the merger, those six departments were consolidated down to just one person. Currently, the two stations share the same Web site, some anchors and reporters. Even their logos unapologetically appear right next to each other:



Just how many stories were the same? Overall KCBS shared a slightly higher percentage of stories with KCAL than vice versa. However, KCAL’s longer one-hour format could be part of the difference. After each week’s debriefing, observers anecdotally noticed that not only were many stories exactly the same, but that they also even appeared in similar order on the same day. While other stations may have run a similar story (and one could argue that top stories of the day should be similar), viewers of KCBS and KCAL are deprived of varying points of view brought by perspectives of unique reporters.

	KCBS (30 min)		KCAL (1 hour)	
	Shared Stories / Total Stories		Shared Stories / Total Stories	
Week One	87/120	73%	87/134	65%
Week Two	70/127	55%	70/118	59%
Week Three	57/85	67%	57/127	45%
Total	214/332	64%	214/379	56%

Of the total percent of news shared by either KCBS or KCAL, what exactly is being shared the most? Not surprisingly, fear and fluff dominate the types of shared stories at 36%—whereas government accounts for just 2%.



Section 4—Print media comparison

LA Times Coverage

Comparison of news coverage on local television and in The Los Angeles Times

What stories were not covered on area television stations during the same weeks TV news was monitored (3/19/06-3/25/06, 4/23/06-4/29/06, and 5/30/06-6/5/06)? To find out, The Los Angeles Times was chosen for comparison because the newspaper has the highest circulation (daily: 907, 997; Sunday: 1,253,849) in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area.

The number of stories culled from the Times is by no means exhaustive. Stories were selected based upon news value and community impact. The stories also cover events and/or trends that local television editorial staff could have reasonably been aware of and able to cover. In other words, opinion editorials, columns and special Times investigations were not included in the list. Most of the stories cover state and local government, but also included are stories about health, education and the environment. Briefly summarized here is a snapshot of coverage in some key categories: crime, local government and elections.

CRIME

Both television news and the Times devote much of their coverage to crime. But while television news tended to focus on crime incidents, the Times in addition featured stories about police policy and reform. For example, in a Times breaking story published on Mar. 22, 2006, “Plan to Change LAPD Consent Decree Rejected,” a federal judge chastises city officials for failing to make key reforms in a 2001 consent decree overseeing the Los Angeles Police Department. None of the television stations carried this story.

Some other significant law enforcement stories not covered on television during the monitoring period, but featured in the Times:

“State to Review Sheriff Badge Issue -- *The attorney general's office will look at the practice of issuing IDs to campaign donors and others in several Southland counties.*” (3/21/06)

“L.A. Police Commission Supports Plea for More Cold Case Officers, Lab Staff -- The panel agreed to seek money for 31 detectives, fingerprint and blood-work specialists and DNA experts in anticipation of getting, on average, one lead a day from a developing statewide criminal database.” (4/26/06)

“Executions Unlikely for Rest of Year -- *Federal judge orders a delay in condemned killer Michael Morales' legal challenge to the state's use of lethal injections.*” (4/28/06)

“L.A. Area to Get \$92.5 Million in Anti-Terror Funds -- Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said the \$80.6 million share that the Los Angeles-Long Beach area will receive -- allocated even as anti-terrorism funding declined nationally -- represents a 14% increase over last year.” (6/1/06)

“L.A. City Atty. Seeks Injunction Against Gang -- City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo announced Thursday he is seeking a court injunction against the Black P Stones street gang, which he said has been terrorizing the Baldwin Village area.” (6/2/06)

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

During the monitoring period, The Times carried more stories than television did about decisions made by local government. The newspaper's local government stories tended to focus on official corruption, development, labor issues and legislation. For example, L.A.-area television viewers during the monitoring period would not have known that the city's mayor had announced that he was reforming the city's regional airport authority to deal with an expected increase in passenger traffic that will tax the aging Los Angeles International Airport (**Mayor Revives Airport Panel in Bid to Divert Traffic From LAX (6/3/06)**).

Other significant local government stories not covered on television during the monitoring period, but featured in the Times:

"A Plan to Spread Homeless Countywide -- Los Angeles County officials Thursday proposed establishing five regional homeless centers in an effort to reduce "dumping" by hospitals and police agencies in skid row, while spreading out the burden of providing care for homeless people beyond downtown Los Angeles." (3/24/06)

"L.A. Controller Urges Switch to Civilian Fire Dispatchers -- *The change could save up to \$4 million, but officials say trained firefighters are needed* (4/25/06) **"Upgrades of 17 L.A. Schools Planned --** *The district will spend \$36 million on its lowest performing high schools, Romer says.* (6/2/06)

"State Funds Sought for San Gabriel Valley Basin Cleanup *Water quality authority cites threats to supplies in seeking \$250 million from this year's budget surplus to complete work that started in '93.* (6/5/06)

ELECTIONS

The Times carried widespread coverage of the 2006 primary elections in California focusing primarily on fundraising, election forums and individual races of state and local seats. What few election stories were covered on television a week before the June primaries (5/31/06-6/5/06) mainly consisted of snapshots of candidates campaigning. Examples of significant campaign fundraising stories covered in the Times but not on television during the monitoring period included:

"Unions Protest Gov.'s Fundraising -- *Labor groups say Schwarzenegger seeking special-interest cash for his reelection.*" (3/21/06)

"The State -- *AT&T, Nunez Swing for the Green. The firm, which has a cable TV bill pending, is holding a fundraiser for Democrats at Pebble Beach and the speaker is the honored golfer.*

"CALIFORNIA ELECTIONS -- *Angelides Mailers Use Preschool Issue to Skirt Campaign Contribution Limits. Prop. 82 ads sent to voters tout his support but don't mention he's running for governor.*

Conclusions

In recent years, local broadcasting has struggled with concentration of ownership, and the attendant costs of highly leveraged acquisitions by parent companies. Stations are saddled with debt, resulting in tighter budgets and diminished capacity for news and public affairs programming. Stations are also responding to the deregulated environment, where there is no obligation to uphold the various local news and public affairs requirements the FCC had, prior to the 1980s, mandated for broadcasters.

How has localism been affected?

The argument typically advanced by corporate media—that government restriction on media abridges the freedom of speech—conveniently turns a blind eye to the reality that unfettered deregulation results in media monopolies and oligarchies that have the economic and political power to inhibit free speech and impair opinion diversity.

One of the key casualties of media concentration and deregulation is cutbacks in local public affairs and local political coverage.

Hidden study revealed

According to a recent bulletin³ from Free Press, former FCC Chairman Michael Powell buried a federal study that showed media consolidation is harmful to local news reporting. The 2004 report found that locally owned stations produced five minutes more local news coverage in a half-hour newscast than their consolidated competitors. Powell commissioned the study hoping it would show that media consolidation didn't negatively impact local communities. Upon seeing the results, Powell ordered that "every last piece" of the study be destroyed, according to a Wednesday report by the Associated Press.

The study — titled "Do Local Owners Deliver More Localism? Some Evidence from Local Broadcast News" — undercuts industry claims, as the FCC considers changing the number of television stations, radio stations and newspapers one company can own in a single market. Among the study's findings:

- * Locally owned stations also aired 3.5 more minutes' worth of on-location local news reports than non-locally owned stations.
- * Network owned and operated stations (those owned by ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox) aired significantly less local news.
- * Owners who controlled stations in multiple markets aired less local news content.
- * Station owners who also control newspapers did not air more local news content.

The secret study was recently leaked to Sen. Barbara Boxer (D. Calif.) in advance of the Senate confirmation hearing for Powell's successor, FCC Chairman Kevin Martin, who voted to weaken longstanding media ownership rules in 2003.

³Excerpts from Free Press.net release.

According to multiple local news studies conducted in recent years, it would appear that what is cost efficient determines what is news, and how it should be covered. Coverage of local politics can be complicated and comparatively costly for news departments. Consequently, viewers are fed a local news diet that can be characterized as overfed but undernourished.

What's at stake?

- Thinner content—more fear and fluff
- Citizens more informed about weather and car chases and celebrities, than about public affairs, elections
- Fewer independent voices, more centralized “news” control, less objectivity and virtually no analysis—sharing resources stifles voices

Recommendations

- **Ask your congressperson to support HR 501**, the Fairness and Accountability in Broadcasting, currently in House committee. This law would define the meaning of public interest and provide fairness standards for stations to follow.
- **Call local news directors** or station managers and let them know what kind of news you want to see.
 - KCBS/KCAL—Patrick McLenahan (pmclenahan@cbs.com) 323-460-3000
 - KNBC—Robert Long (robert.long@nbc.com) 818-840-3442
 - KABC—Arnie Kleiner (arnie.kleiner@abc.com) 818-863-7707
 - KTLA—Vinnie Malcolm (vmalcolm@tribune.com) 323-460-3905
 - KCOP/KTTV—Jose Rios (jrios@fox11la.com) 310-584-2014
- **Call or write the FCC.** For more information, call 888-225-5322, visit <http://www.fcc.gov/contacts.html> or write to the Federal Communications Commission 445 12th Street, SW Washington, D.C. 20554

Appendix

For a comprehensive list of tables and data as well as more detailed list of stories from The Los Angeles Times during the monitoring period, please send an email to info@takebackyournews.com.

Other sources include:

Federal Communications Commission at www.fcc.gov

Common Cause Report (The fallout of the Telecommunications Act of 1996: Unintended Consequences and Lessons Learned)

Center for Public Integrity at www.publicintegrity.org

Free Press at www.freepress.net