

Assessing the Role of Local Television News in Elections: Stimulating Involvement or Indifference

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In examining the news media's role in the American political system, Robert Entman argued that while the media "can wield the power to alter public policy and cripple presidencies," they have not been able to "harness that power to serve democratic citizenship and promote government accountability as free press ideals demand."¹ The problem, as Entman and others have noted, lies in the conflict between the need to maintain the profitability of news organizations and their ability to inform citizens adequately about policy problems and solutions.² This conflict is particularly strong in the coverage of politics and elections.

While criticisms of campaign coverage have persisted over the past two decades, a recent change in the very structure of the American mass media has transformed the way news is disseminated. No longer are the three television network newscasts and the Washington press corps the predominant source of news for most Americans. Increasingly, citizens are turning elsewhere for news and information about their worlds, and political candidates may be found everywhere from morning talk shows to midnight appearances on MTV.

While many of these so-called "new media" received attention by scholars studying the 1992 presidential campaign, commentators have largely overlooked one important new vehicle for political debate and news dissemination. Increasingly, local television news is becoming a major source of information about politics and government for American citizens, while at the same time serving as a growing target by campaigns seeking to transmit messages to key segments of the electorate. Yet relatively few scholars have attempted to analyze systematically the distinctive nature of local television news coverage and suggest whether the medium's entrance into the national political arena bodes well for the electorate.

This Article will attempt to address some of the key questions raised by local television's growing role in national campaign coverage. Will the increased coverage of presidential campaigns on local television represent an important decentralization of reporting, producing increased focus on the

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1. ROBERT ENTMAN, *DEMOCRACY WITHOUT CITIZENS: MEDIA AND THE DECAY OF AMERICAN POLITICS* 3 (1989).

2. *Id.* at 17-23. See, e.g., John McManus, *How Local Television Learns What is News*, 67 *JOURNALISM Q.* 672, 673 n.1 (1990).

uniquely local dimensions of national issues and stimulating increased voter participation? Or will the change simply lead to a greater facility for campaigns to manipulate information about candidates? What implications will such expanded national campaign coverage bear for local television's coverage of state and local elections? Will increased experience covering national campaigns improve local campaign reporting or merely detract from the time and resources required to cover local races?

I. LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS AND NATIONAL POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

The arrival of local television news onto the national political scene did not occur suddenly in 1992. As far back as Richard Nixon's 1968 campaign, presidential candidates sought local news coverage through campaign trips, often simply flying into a regional airport and offering television interviews from the tarmac.³ Not until 1992, however, did the local media become a major vehicle for transmitting political messages. At this time, changes in technology and audience demographics, along with a growing awareness of major differences between local and national coverage, encouraged campaigns to use local television news actively in order to bypass the national media. The new capability of most local television stations to conduct remote interviews through two-way satellite hookups,⁴ and the widespread acquisition of mobile satellite trucks allowing stations to offer live coverage of campaign events in distant parts of their markets,⁵ removed many geographical constraints on local television news coverage. For the first time, local news stations were able to offer timely coverage of national events. At the same time, audiences for local television news have steadily grown, providing candidates with access to a voter base that often matches or exceeds the size of the local audience watching network television news. This confluence of forces—along with a heightened sense of the unique hospitality of the medium to certain types of political messages—led the Bush and Clinton campaigns to seek out local television news coverage in 1992. Those local television newscasts which were actively courted, displaying a new independence from the networks and facing their own internal pressures, responded to the overtures by providing extensive coverage of the presidential campaign. By some estimates, local television

3. A. L. May, *Clinton Tour a Moving Feast for Midwest's TV Stations*, ATLANTA CONST., Aug. 8, 1992, at A6.

4. Richard L. Berke, *Satellite Technology Allows Campaigns to Deliver Their Messages Unfiltered*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 23, 1992, at A21.

5. Howard Kurtz, *Candidate Road Shows Reroute News Coverage*, WASH. POST, Sept. 2, 1992, at A4.

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news came to inform almost as many Americans about the presidential campaign as did network news.⁶

The growing eagerness of campaigns to bypass the national media in favor of local television, and the equally significant trend toward increasing numbers of Americans turning to local television for their news about national campaigns, has taken place against a backdrop of mounting criticism of the national news media's coverage of presidential campaigns. Before considering the way local television news covered the presidential campaign of 1992, we should review the research that has been undertaken on national news coverage of political campaigns.

II. MEDIA COVERAGE OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: THE CRITIQUE

News coverage of political campaigns has come under increasing criticism in the last decade, with three major weaknesses frequently cited: an over-emphasis on the "horse race," the over-reliance on and misuse of public opinion polls, and the growing respectability of investigating the private lives of candidates. These criticisms are described below.

A. *Focus on the Horse Race*

Many studies of media coverage of presidential elections have presented a common criticism: the media focus too much on the "horse race"—who is likely to win and lose—and too little on substantive issues and the qualifications of candidates to govern. For example, Thomas Patterson found that the heaviest emphasis in campaign reporting is on "the simple mechanics of campaigning—the candidates' travels here and there, their organizational efforts, their strategies—as well as voting projections and returns, likely convention scenarios, and so on."⁷ In addition, he noted that "reporters tend to focus on the campaign's competitive aspects," or what he calls the "game perspective."⁸ Patterson concluded that "[e]lection news concentrates on competition and controversy instead of basic policy and leadership questions."⁹

In a study focusing exclusively on newspaper coverage of presidential elections, Erica King discovered similar results. Her comparison of *USA Today*

6. TIMES MIRROR CENTER FOR THE PEOPLE AND THE PRESS, *THE PEOPLE, THE PRESS, AND POLITICS CAMPAIGN '92: VOTERS SAY "THUMBS UP" TO CAMPAIGN, PROCESS, AND COVERAGE*, SURVEY XIII 25 (1992).

7. THOMAS E. PATTERSON, *THE MASS MEDIA ELECTION: HOW AMERICANS CHOOSE THEIR PRESIDENT* 21 (1980).

8. *Id.* at 22.

9. *Id.* at 174; see also MICHAEL J. ROBINSON & MARGARET A. SHEEHAN, *OVER THE WIRE AND ON TV: CBS AND UPI IN CAMPAIGN '80* 207-16 (1983).

and *New York Times* coverage of the 1988 presidential primaries found that the horse race was the predominant campaign theme in both the general audience and elite newspaper. In addition, she found both papers were relatively inattentive to substantive issues.¹⁰

Professor Doris Graber has also noted that media election coverage is characterized by an "inordinate amount of attention to campaign hoopla and the horse race aspects of the contests. They slight political, social, and economic problems facing the country and say little about the merits of the solutions proposed, unless these issues can be made exciting and visually dramatic."¹¹ She concluded that voters receive relatively little help from the media in evaluating candidates on the basis of issues.¹²

Similarly, Dean Kathleen Hall Jamieson's study of the 1988 presidential election found that the media rely overwhelmingly on a "strategy" rather than an "issues" schema in their reporting. She argues that the strategy schema "disengages" the electorate in a number of ways. First, it provides an understanding of candidate strategy without explaining the country's problems and which candidate is more likely to solve them. In addition, it invites audiences to critique a campaign as if it were a performance in which the electorate is a passive spectator. She found that a focus on strategy by the news media also led to a reduction in the amount of information campaigns attempt to communicate and induced cynicism into the political process.¹³

B. *The Increasing Use of Polls*

Along with the media's overwhelming focus on the horse race has come a concomitant increase in the use of polls—often commissioned by the media themselves—to project candidates' standing with the voters at various points in the campaign. In examining this proliferation of poll results, commentators have cited several important uses of polls. For example, polls may be used to check candidates' claims about the direction of popular opinion and, in turn, inform candidates about the nature of public sentiment on a variety of issues. Some analysts have claimed that polls help voters make informed decisions at election time, allowing them to know when they might be throwing away their vote because a candidate has little chance to win.¹⁴

However, there are serious problems with the use of polls in election coverage. Because of the way they are presented in the media, poll results may

10. Erica G. King, *Thematic Coverage of the 1988 Presidential Primaries: A Comparison of USA Today and The New York Times*, 67 JOURNALISM Q. 85 (1990).

11. DORIS GRABER, *MASS MEDIA AND AMERICAN POLITICS* 269 (4th ed. 1993).

12. *Id.* at 271.

13. KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON, *DIRTY POLITICS* 186-87 (1992).

14. See, e.g., Philip Meyer, *Stop Pulling Punches with Polls*, COLUM. JOURNALISM REV., Nov.-Dec. 1991, at 64-67.

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lead to the evaluation of candidates on the grounds of electability rather than on their substantive policy stances. Particularly when polls are covered prominently early in campaigns, they may give a decided advantage to candidates with higher name recognition over unknowns, since news coverage of strong standing in the polls often leads to a greater ability to raise funds. Alternatively, polls may provide an advantage to the “underdog” who outperforms expectations. Most seriously, perhaps, prominent coverage of poll results suggests to voters that contests are decided before election day, thus depressing voter turnout.¹⁵

Additionally, while polls vary greatly in quality and accuracy, the media may actually face an incentive to use the most surprising results. That is, while campaigns demand precision from their own internal pollsters, the media may have a preference for polls of poorer quality that offer more surprising (and therefore more interesting) results and are also less expensive to produce.¹⁶ News organizations have also been faulted for heralding only the results of their own polls, rather than providing the perspective of the full array of media polls. At the same time, they rarely use reputable pollsters to critique unexpected results.¹⁷

C. *The Question of Character*

The 1988 presidential election marked the first time that the question of a candidate’s “character” took on a position of prominence in media coverage. When Paul Taylor, a political reporter for the *Washington Post*, asked Gary Hart during a televised press conference whether he had ever committed adultery and reputable news organizations stationed reporters outside of Hart’s residence to prove that he was guilty of marital infidelity, a new standard was set whereby journalists considered investigating the private lives of candidates an acceptable practice. Such concern with so-called character issues blossomed in the 1992 election. When Gennifer Flowers claimed in January of that year to have had an affair with Bill Clinton, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* immediately picked up the story. Eventually, every mainstream news outlet in the country followed suit.¹⁸ A few weeks later, after the *Wall Street Journal* published a story about the claims of an Arkansas ROTC

15. For a good overview of the media’s use of polls, see MEDIA POLLS IN AMERICAN POLITICS (Thomas E. Mann & Gary R. Orren eds., 1992).

16. See Humphrey Taylor, *Can Bad Polls Drive Out Good?*, NAT’L REV., Oct. 19, 1992, at 48.

17. THE FREEDOM FORUM MEDIA STUDIES CENTER, THE FINISH LINE: COVERING THE CAMPAIGN’S FINAL DAYS 55-59 (1993).

18. See, e.g., Howard Kurtz & Dan Balz, *Candidate Acknowledges Phone Calls to Woman Making Allegations: Clinton Calls Tabloid Report of 12-year Affair “Not True,”* WASH. POST, Jan. 24, 1992, at A8; John Dillon, *Clinton Responds to Flowers Allegations*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Jan. 28, 1992, at 6; David Lauter & Robert Shogan, *Clinton Denies Tabloid Story of 12-Year Affair*, L.A. TIMES, Jan. 24, 1992, at A20.

recruiter that Clinton had evaded the draft,¹⁹ allegations of draft-dodging became a continual focus of stories in major newspapers through both the Spring primary season and into the Fall campaign.²⁰ Similarly, the question of Clinton's marijuana use was front-page news in many respected publications.²¹

In defense of such prominent coverage of personal issues, journalists have argued that character is a valid subject for coverage because a president needs to possess qualities such as moral goodness, strength of will, judgment, and leadership. Other observers have criticized the media's new preoccupation with character. As Judith Lichtenberg has noted, "the politics of character tends to drive out the politics of substance."²² She explains that because discussions of character are so interesting, they often draw the attention of voters away from serious issues. Additionally, she claims that despite the media's fascination with a politician's sex life, "[sexual behavior] rarely tells us anything about a person's fitness for political office."²³

In summary, traditional media coverage, featuring poll results prominently and lavishing much time and attention on investigating the private lives of candidates, has been criticized because it takes the focus of campaign coverage away from the country's problems and from analyzing which candidates might be best qualified to solve them. At the same time, such coverage has been found to engender cynicism and disaffection among an electorate that is presented with the candidate as pure strategist or personally flawed.

III. THE INCREASING ROLE OF TELEVISION IN ELECTION COVERAGE

While criticisms have been directed at print and broadcast media alike, scholars have increasingly come to focus on the unique characteristics of television news and its role in election reporting. This interest has resulted from a recognition that television has largely supplanted newspapers as the

19. Jeffrey Birnbaum, *Clinton Received a Vietnam Draft Deferment for an ROTC Program that He Never Joined*, WALL ST. J., Feb. 6, 1992, at A16.

20. See, e.g., Dan Balz, *Clinton Disputes Draft-Evasion Suggestions*, WASH. POST, Feb. 7, 1992, at A4; Gwen Ifill, *Vietnam-Years Draft Status Becomes Issue for Clinton*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 7, 1992, at A16. Later primary stories included Dan Balz, *Clinton is Troubled Anew by Draft Issues*, WASH. POST, Apr. 6, 1992, at A15; Dan Balz, *Clinton Acknowledges Receiving Draft Induction Notice in 1969*, WASH. POST, Apr. 5, 1992, at A1; Ralph Frammolino, *Clinton Joined ROTC After He Got Draft Notice*, L.A. TIMES, Apr. 5, 1992, at A1. For Fall stories about the draft issue, see Dan Balz, *Clinton Uncle Said to Have Lobbied Draft Board*, WASH. POST, Sept. 2, 1992, at A4; Jeffrey Birnbaum, *Lingering Debate over Clinton's Draft Record Focuses on Two Questions Raised by his Critics*, WALL ST. J., Sept. 10, 1992, at A16; Gwen Ifill, *Facing Draft Questions, Clinton Avoids the Press*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 11, 1992, at A13.

21. See, e.g., Thomas Edsall, *Clinton Admits 60's Marijuana Use*, WASH. POST, Mar. 30, 1992, at A1; Douglas Jehl, *Clinton Tells of Marijuana Use in 60's*, L.A. TIMES, Mar. 30, 1992, at A1.

22. JUDITH LICHTENBERG, *THE POLITICS AND THE CHARACTER OF JOURNALISM* 3 (The Joan Shoreinstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy Discussion Paper D-2, 1989).

23. *Id.* at 4.

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medium Americans use to educate themselves about their world, and in particular about elections. For example, the Roper Organization found that in December of 1990, sixty-nine percent of Americans reported getting most of their news from television. Forty-four percent said they relied on television as their only major source of news.²⁴

One concern about the growing role of network television news in politics is its brevity of coverage, particularly the limited amount of time a candidate is allotted to make her case to the American people. Daniel Hallin's study of network news coverage of presidential elections found that the average "sound bite" (the amount of time a candidate is shown speaking) has shrunk from forty-three seconds in 1968 to nine seconds in 1988.²⁵ Hallin notes that the trend is disturbing because "the public never has a chance to hear a candidate—or anyone else—speak for more than about twenty seconds."²⁶

While the sound bite has been shrinking, network news coverage has become more mediated. That is, the role of the journalist has changed from passive stenographer of campaign rhetoric to political analyst deconstructing campaign strategy. This mediation has often taken the form of interpreting the political meaning behind the candidates' words rather than analyzing the substance of their proposals. As a result, television election coverage has become increasingly more negative in tone, as campaign plans and positions are cast in an entirely opportunistic perspective.²⁷

Television news coverage is also susceptible to manipulation by candidates and campaign workers who have learned how to use visual images to undermine criticism or analysis. By understanding how to feed television's continual appetite for dramatic visual events, campaigns are able to use highly orchestrated photo opportunities to send positive messages about their candidates. The Reagan Administration, for example, pioneered the technique of using positive visual appearances to counter unpopular decisions, such as visiting with senior citizens at a nursing home right after funds for nursing home care had been cut.²⁸ Particularly during the 1988 campaign, network television reporters were faulted for allowing the candidates to direct news coverage into photo opportunities at flag factories or in armored tanks, rather than pressing candidates regarding their stands on issues of importance to the American people.²⁹

24. ROPER ORGANIZATION, *AMERICA'S WATCHING: PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD TELEVISION* 10 (1991).

25. Daniel C. Hallin, *Sound Bite News: Television Coverage of Elections, 1968-1988*, 42 J. COMM. 5, 5-6 (1992); see also KIKU ADATTO, *SOUND BITE DEMOCRACY: NETWORK EVENING NEWS PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN COVERAGE, 1968 AND 1988* (Joan Shoreinstein Barone Center for Press, Politics, and Public Policy Research Paper R-2, 1990).

26. Hallin, *supra* note 25, at 19.

27. *Id.* at 14-15.

28. JAMIESON, *supra* note 13, at 4.

29. *Id.* at 3-11.

Largely in response to the criticism of their performance in 1988, national broadcast journalists made some improvements in their approach to campaign reporting in the 1992 election. In particular, network journalists have become wary of manipulation through photo opportunities and media events that make for good visuals. In the last presidential campaign, they were more likely to take an active role in debunking the strategies of the campaigns and in contrasting candidate claims with actual records and plans. Also in 1992, the networks routinely assigned "truth squads" to investigate the validity of candidate claims in debates, and most networks performed "adwatches" which set out to check the claims made in television ads. At the same time, there was increased coverage of substantive issues in lengthy pieces which were selected not by campaigns, but by the news programs themselves.³⁰

However, Hallin's work has shown that despite the trend towards more substantive and critical reporting, the new mediated journalism of network news "puts the image-making at the center of politics and pushes real political debate to the margins."³¹ He adds, "[e]ven when a modern campaign report devotes significant time to issues, the main story line typically focuses on strategy and tactics, often on the question of whether the candidate made a 'good move' in focusing on a particular issue."³² He emphasizes that the connection between horse race coverage and soundbite journalism remains very strong.³³

The 1992 presidential campaign was also marked by the emergence of the so-called "non-traditional media." Increasingly, presidential candidates tried to use television talk shows to reach voters. This began with Ross Perot's February 20, 1992 appearance on CNN's *Larry King Live*, when he first acknowledged that he might consider running for President, and continued with appearances by Perot, Clinton, and Jerry Brown on the *Donahue* show in March and April 1992. In June, Clinton appeared for two hours on the morning talk show *Today*, and Ross Perot followed two days later with a two-hour session of his own. One of Clinton's most memorable appearances on a nontraditional media vehicle came when he appeared in dark glasses playing the saxophone on the late-night *Arsenio Hall* show. While George Bush took less advantage of the new media, he did appear on ABC's *20/20* in June, CBS *This Morning* in July, and NBC's *Dateline* in August.³⁴

By using such nontraditional media, candidates were able to overcome television's increasing limitations on soundbite length and to avoid the growing

30. See THE FREEDOM FORUM MEDIA STUDIES CENTER, AN UNCERTAIN SEASON: REPORTING IN THE POSTPRIMARY PERIOD (1992) [hereinafter AN UNCERTAIN SEASON].

31. Hallin, *supra* note 25, at 20.

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.* at 21.

34. Dirk Smillie, *Talking to America: The Rise of Talk Shows in the '92 Campaign*, in AN UNCERTAIN SEASON, *supra* note 30, at 17, 24.

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reporter mediation and negative tone of coverage. In contrast to their treatment on the news, candidates were afforded more lengthy platforms in which to make their case directly to the American people. Moreover, rather than focusing on strategy and the horse race, or on personal issues such as draft dodging and marijuana smoking, such forums held fairly strongly to an examination of substantive issues such as health care and the economy.³⁵

Preliminary studies of the emerging use of the new media have recognized their strength in “decentralizing the dialogue” of a campaign and in providing longer exposure to candidates. These new outlets have also served to counteract the news media’s focus on the horse race and the reliance on political pundits’ view of candidates, and succeeded in demonstrating that the public was interested in issues.³⁶ They have also been seen as successful in reaching new audiences. For example, recognizing that in 1988 almost two-thirds of voters ages eighteen to twenty-four did not vote, cable’s Music Television Channel (MTV) offered the presidential candidates the opportunity to be interviewed on their programs, an invitation heartily accepted by Bill Clinton. Such appearances, along with a public service announcement campaign on MTV called *Rock the Vote*, were said to be responsible for the registration of tens of thousands of new young voters.³⁷

However, the nontraditional media were not ideally suited to the democratic process. The talk show hosts were often unprepared to question the candidates as incisively as reporters assigned to the campaign might have done, and the programs did not provide viewers with background research on problems, policies or candidate records, or the kind of checks on a candidate’s claims and arguments that knowledgeable reporters might carry out. For example, Ross Perot appeared numerous times on *Larry King Live* and *The Today Show*, but it was only on his single appearance on the network news’ *Meet the Press* that he was pushed for the specifics of his plans. It was the investigative digging into Perot’s background performed by hard news reporters—not the questions of talk show hosts—that was said to have led to a deep examination of his qualifications, and his eventual withdrawal from the race in July.³⁸

Although debates about the merits of the nontraditional media received much attention in 1992, another equally important shift in the nature of political communication went largely unexamined: The 1992 presidential campaign marked the first time that local television news played a major role in the coverage of presidential politics. Whether through satellite interviews or in-

35. See *id.* at 20-23.

36. *Id.* at 27.

37. DIRK SMILLIE, THE FREEDOM FORUM MEDIA STUDIES CENTER, MADONNA, THE RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS . . . AND BILL CLINTON, THE HOMESTRETCH: NEW POLITICS, NEW MEDIA, NEW VOTERS? (1992).

38. Barry Golson & Peter Ross Range, *Wotta Year! The TV Campaign That Transformed American Politics—George Bush Called It ‘Wacky’, Bill Clinton a ‘Revolution’*, TV GUIDE, Nov. 7, 1992, at 19.

studio town hall meetings, local television provided an unprecedented platform for the campaign. The next section will address the factors that lie behind this surprising new entrance of local television news into national politics.

IV. THE GROWING ROLE OF LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS

Unlike American newspapers, which trace their roots back to the founding of the colonies, local television news is a relatively young medium. Begun in the 1940s, local newscasts were originally aired only to comply with the public affairs requirements of the Federal Communications Commission; and until the 1960s, even the longest local news shows did not exceed fifteen minutes.³⁹ However, in the 1970s, local television stations began to recognize that news programs could be highly profitable since they were relatively inexpensive to produce and had considerable audience draw. At the same time, stations could retain all of the advertising revenues received during local news time, as compared to only a fraction of the revenues derived from network programming slots. As a result, stations have consistently resisted attempts by network news to expand the time allotment for network newscasts, which have remained at one half-hour only.⁴⁰

Research on television news has shown that its unique appeal to audiences lies in what has been called the "para-social relationship" that viewers come to form with on-air personalities.⁴¹ Viewers enjoy a kind of "intimacy at a distance" with television news anchors and reporters that seems to be as important as the news itself in audience retention.⁴² A survey conducted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, for example, found that people had a significantly higher trust in television anchors than in newspaper reporters. Specifically, the study found that while forty percent of respondents rated the honesty and ethical standards of television anchors to be high, only eighteen percent did the same for newspaper reporters. The study suggested that "the trustworthiness of TV anchors seems to be aided by the fact that viewers feel they know them. . . . By contrast, newspaper editors and reporters are less well known."⁴³ A case could be made that viewers form an even stronger tie with their local television anchors than with the more remote and geographically distant network anchors. Local television stations actively try to encourage this kind of trust and affinity between viewers and anchors by running

39. MAURY GREEN, *TELEVISION NEWS: ANATOMY AND PROCESS* 3-6 (1969).

40. AV WESTIN, *NEWSWATCH: HOW TV DECIDES THE NEWS* 207-08 (1982).

41. Donald Horton & R. Richard Wohl, *Mass Communication as Para-Social Interaction*, 19 *PSYCHIATRY* 215 (1956).

42. Mark R. Levy, *Watching TV News as Para-Social Interaction*, 23 *J. BROADCASTING* 69, 69 (1979).

43. MORI RESEARCH INC., *NEWSPAPER CREDIBILITY: BUILDING READER TRUST* 25 (1985).

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continuous promotional campaigns touting the warmth and friendliness of on-air talent.⁴⁴

As a result of such factors, audiences for local television news and the number of local news programs produced have expanded over the past two decades. Thus, in many media markets of the country, ratings (expressed as a percentage of the regional audience watching a program) for local news have come to closely match those for network news. For example, as many households in the Denver market watch the early evening local news as the network news, while in Cleveland the size of a local newscast audience is even larger than that for the network news.⁴⁵

Such comparisons between a single local newscast and network newscast, however, actually underestimate the differences between the size of the local news audience as compared to the network news audience. As noted above, while the networks are limited to one half-hour of news per day, local television stations offer as many as seven newscasts in a twenty-four-hour period (for example, in the early morning, at noon, in the early evening, and late night.)

For example, consider the case of WABC in New York City. Ratings for February 1993 indicate that ABC's network news, *World News Tonight*, reached an average of 894,000 households in the market. However, local newscasts on the same ABC affiliate reached 162,000 households at six a.m., 299,000 at noon, 760,000 at five p.m., 775,000 at six p.m. and 806,000 at eleven p.m.⁴⁶ While some of that viewership is duplicated—for example, someone watching at five may still be tuned in at six o'clock—unquestionably much of it is discrete. Even if we assume that half of households watch more than one newscast, we see that local newscasts draw double or triple the audiences of network newscasts. Similar patterns of audience size for local as compared to national newscasts were found for other markets examined, with audiences for the three network news programs outweighed by audiences for the ten to fifteen local newscasts broadcast throughout the day.⁴⁷

The size of local television news audiences has also come to exceed by far the size of metropolitan newspaper audiences in the same region. For example, in Philadelphia, while weekday circulation of the metropolitan dailies, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Daily News*, stood at 502,740 and 197,481 respectively in 1993, the number of households reached by all local newscasts in the market at six p.m. alone was over a million.⁴⁸

44. PHYLLIS KANISS, MAKING LOCAL NEWS 104-05 (1991).

45. NIELSEN MEDIA RESEARCH, VIEWERS IN PROFILE: CLEVELAND, DENVER, HOUSTON, LOS ANGELES, PHILADELPHIA, AND SEATTLE (Feb. 1993).

46. NIELSEN MEDIA RESEARCH, VIEWERS IN PROFILE: NEW YORK (Feb. 1993).

47. NIELSEN MEDIA RESEARCH, *supra* note 45.

48. NIELSEN MEDIA RESEARCH, VIEWERS IN PROFILE: PHILADELPHIA PA (Feb. 1993).

Clearly, local television newscasts are becoming a vehicle for political communication on a par with network newscasts and metropolitan newspapers. Survey research bears out the growing power of the medium. The Roper Organization found that in 1990, more Americans said they became best acquainted with candidates running in local elections from television (forty-three percent) than from newspapers (forty percent).⁴⁹ A September 1992 survey by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press found that almost as many voters said they got most of their news about the presidential campaign from local television news as from network television news (thirty-seven percent for network, thirty-six percent for local).⁵⁰

The recognition that growing numbers of voters are getting all or much of their news from local television has encouraged national political campaigns and officeholders to become far more aggressive in pursuit of coverage on the medium. Local television has clearly become the news medium of choice for many Americans. There is, however, another factor leading politicians and officials to the doors of the local TV station: the perceived ease in getting a message across relatively unimpeded. Campaigns have come to recognize that there is a major distinction between how local television stations cover the news and how it is covered by either network television or local newspapers. In order to understand the impact of local television news, we must explore these distinctions more fully.

A. News Decisions of the Local Television Station

Despite its growing influence on the American public, local television news has received relatively little serious analysis. The assumption is that local television news is a kind of country cousin to its network counterparts, subject to the same pressures and constraints as national news, only on a smaller and more provincial scale. At the same time, local television is dismissed as a more sensational version of the morning newspaper, with scant attention paid to the reasons why print and broadcast media in the same region should in fact so diverge in their content.

Although largely unrecognized, there are clear reasons why the content of local television news differs from either that of network television or newspapers—reasons that lead directly to an explanation of why so many became significant vehicles of national political coverage in the last presidential election.

49. ROPER ORGANIZATION, *supra* note 24, at 22.

50. TIMES MIRROR CENTER FOR THE PEOPLE AND THE PRESS, *supra* note 6, at 25.

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1. *Political Fragmentation of Target Audiences*

While local television and network news share some important common ground—such as the need for good visuals and short, snappy sound bites—there is one fundamental but overlooked difference between the two media: the structure of government representing the target audience. Network news targets an audience united by at least one common set of political institutions: the United States Government. All Americans watching Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw or Peter Jennings are governed by the same President and Congress and are interested in a common set of political stories. However, the same statement does not hold true for local media markets since media markets are set regionally. Local television stations confront a market composed of one or more cities, as well as hundreds of suburbs, smaller towns, and even rural areas, each with its own form of local government.⁵¹

As a result, the fundamental dilemma facing the local television newscast is how to cover politics and government when the target audience is fragmented among hundreds of political jurisdictions, where people may be passionately interested in the affairs of their own township but care little about the decisions of a zoning board in a neighboring borough. This dilemma is particularly troublesome when it comes to deciding how to cover campaigns and elections, and is a problem that national television news rarely faces.

2. *Competitive Markets and Limited Reporting Staffs*

There are other factors which influence the distinctive nature of local television reporting and make it distinctive from newspaper coverage. Metropolitan newspapers are also faced with the dilemma of covering local news for an audience which is composed of hundreds of jurisdictions. Their response has been to strengthen their suburban news coverage by enlarging their reporting staffs and embarking on ambitious “zoning” plans through which different geographic areas in a region receive different local news sections.⁵²

Local television stations have approached the problem differently. Because local television news operations are more technology intensive than newspapers, they have invested in updating sophisticated equipment (e.g., acquiring new mobile satellite trucks) rather than increasing the size of the reporting staff. In addition, because their success has been linked to audience rapport with on-air anchors and reporters, stations have tended to pay far higher salaries than a newspaper pays its reporters.⁵³ As a result, staffing levels at

51. For an extensive discussion of the problem of political fragmentation for metropolitan news organizations, see KANISS, *supra* note 44.

52. *Id.* at 59-64.

53. *Id.* at 104-05.

a local television station tend to be radically lower than at a local newspaper. While the typical major city metropolitan newspaper has hundreds of reporters on staff, a television station in the same market will rarely have more than a dozen reporters charged with covering a similar or even larger market area.⁵⁴

In recent years, as a result of increasing competition for audiences, resources available to local television stations have been on a downward swing. While metropolitan and local newspapers in America have largely developed into monopolies in their markets, local television stations have faced an increasing level of competition, making profitability a larger concern than ever. In most markets, television stations face competition not only from two or three other newscasts but from an increasing array of cable programming. Even as audiences are fragmenting, newscasts have increasingly become profit centers for local television stations and, in turn, for the larger conglomerates which have come to own them. Just as they are being depended upon to generate sizable profits, local newscasts are faced with slowly dwindling audiences and market shares. As a result, local newscasts have been forced to cut back on newsroom budgets and keep expenses to a minimum.⁵⁵

Because of such limited resources, local television news, unlike newspapers or network television newscasts, has tended not to assign reporters to specific "beats." A beat structure uses specific reporters for different geographic or substantive areas. As a result, a reporter can become experienced in the issues of that area and develop a set of sources through which to discover news. In contrast, local television stations tend to use reporters for "general assignment," because it allows for more efficient use of a small number of journalists. This assignment system places local television reporters at a distinct disadvantage when compared to their national or print counterparts. They must depend much more heavily on eager sources to provide them with news, unlike newspaper or national television reporters who can actively seek out stories.⁵⁶

John McManus's research confirms that local television news stations are particularly passive in their search for news because of the need to expend minimal resources and keep profits high. He found that local television news predominantly gets its ideas for stories from press releases, video feeds, police and fire checks, and the local newspaper. Rarely do local TV reporters cultivate sources, search documents, or attend government meetings. As a result, local television news is particularly susceptible to manipulation by sources who know how to provide good stories at relatively low cost to the station.⁵⁷

54. *Id.* at 105-06.

55. Phylliss Kaniss, *Too Few Reporters*, AM. JOURNALISM REV., Sept. 1993, at 21; J. Max Robins, *News in the '90's: Stretched to the Limit*, CHANNELS, Sept. 1989, at 42-55.

56. EDWARD EPSTEIN, *NEWS FROM NOWHERE: TELEVISION AND THE NEWS* 135-38 (2d ed. 1974).

57. McManus, *supra* note 2, at 677-83 (1990).

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Local television reporters also have the additional burden of being responsible for locating video to accompany their pieces. In contrast, the typical network television reporter is assigned a producer who can line up interviews, assemble video, and work with video editors, freeing the reporter to uncover information. With only limited time to report and produce video for their stories, local television reporters are far more dependent than network or newspaper reporters on political sources who can provide them with appealing visual images. Therefore, while network reporters have become increasingly resistant to being used by campaign photo opportunities, local broadcast journalists do not have this luxury. Local television reporters often make news selection decisions as a result of resource constraints.⁵⁸

Oscar Gandy coined the term "information subsidy" to indicate how sources are able to influence news agendas by reducing journalists' costs of collecting information.⁵⁹ Berkowitz and Adams have also shown how local television news stations are particularly dependent on such information subsidies.⁶⁰ Therefore, sources who understand the unique needs of local television news and can provide information which meets those needs will be most likely to get their stories, as well as their own angle on those stories, covered.⁶¹

It is the combination of these two factors—the need to appeal to a politically fragmented market and the need to collect the news with minimal reporting resources—which explains the perfunctory way local television covers local politics and elections, as well as the seemingly paradoxical trend towards increased coverage of presidential elections.

B. Local Television News and the Coverage of Government and Politics

Although research on the coverage of politics and government by local television stations is relatively limited, the studies which have been carried out indicate that local television news has hardly distinguished itself in its coverage of either national or local elections. In particular, research has shown that local television news gives little attention to local political races and, when it does, the content tends to focus on the most trivial aspects of the election. For example, David H. Ostroff, who examined local television news coverage of the 1978 Ohio gubernatorial campaign during the month preceding the election,

58. Dan Berkowitz, *Assessing Forces in the Selection of Local Television News*, 35 J. BROADCASTING & ELECTRONIC MEDIA 245, 249 (1991).

59. OSCAR H. GANDY, JR., *BEYOND AGENDA SETTING: INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND PUBLIC POLICY* 8-9 (1982).

60. See generally Dan Berkowitz & Douglas B. Adams, *Information Subsidy and Agenda-Building in Local Television News*, 67 JOURNALISM Q., 723, 728-30 (1990).

61. On the role of sources in influencing news, see HERBERT GANS, *DECIDING WHAT'S NEWS: A STUDY OF CBS EVENING NEWS, NBC NIGHTLY NEWS, NEWSWEEK AND TIME* (1979); KANISS, *supra* note 44, at 160-87.

found that local television stations in the state capital devoted only between 1.6% and 5.8% of their news time to the campaign.⁶² Ostroff and Sandell examined campaign coverage by television stations in Toledo and Columbus, Ohio during the Fall of 1982 and found that "[t]elevision news provided relatively small amounts of information about most races and no coverage of some."⁶³ Moreover, they found that coverage of candidates and ballot issues outside the city limits of Toledo and Columbus was "almost non-existent."⁶⁴

A follow-up study, undertaken in 1986, found that local television news coverage of gubernatorial campaigns continued to be "sporadic or idiosyncratic," and provided little information to the electorate. They also found that the campaign activities which received extensive coverage were those which seemed to have the highest entertainment value; that there was little "enterprise reporting"; and that instead, TV tended to cover planned events, such as news conferences and rallies. Their research also found that TV reporters ignored position papers in their relatively brief stories.⁶⁵

Entman found a similar focus on the more trivial aspects of elections in his research on local television coverage of the 1988 presidential election in several markets. In his study of local news coverage of Super Tuesday during the 1988 presidential election, Entman noted that local television stressed the horse race and ignored public policy positions, records, and qualifications. Entman found, interestingly enough, that there was little variation across stations in different markets; all but one of the thirteen stations examined devoted three-quarters or more of their coverage to the horse race and less than one-tenth to substance, which suggests that "professional values, organizational goals, and practical constraints are similar from market to market."⁶⁶

More recently, my own research from the 1991 Philadelphia mayor's race uncovered similar results. Examination of local television coverage by the network affiliates in the region revealed that the primary, which was characterized by sharp personal attacks and a close horse race, received twice as much coverage as the general election, where one candidate had a strong lead over his opponent in the polls. In the general election, the campaign received an average of a mere seventeen seconds per broadcast.⁶⁷

62. David H. Ostroff, *A Participant-Observer Study of TV Campaign Coverage*, 57 JOURNALISM Q. 415-19 (1980).

63. David H. Ostroff & Karin Sandell, *Local Station Coverage of Campaigns: A Tale of Two Cities in Ohio*, 61 JOURNALISM Q. 346, 350 (1984).

64. *Id.* at 351.

65. David H. Ostroff & Karin L. Sandell, *Campaign Coverage by Local TV News in Columbus, Ohio, 1978-1986*, 66 JOURNALISM Q. 114, 116-20 (1989).

66. Robert Entman, *Super Tuesday and the Future of Local News*, in THE FUTURE OF NEWS: TELEVISION-NEWSPAPERS-WIRE SERVICES-NEWSMAGAZINE 53-67 (Philip S. Cook et. al eds., 1992).

67. See PHYLISS KANISS, THE MEDIA AND THE MAYOR'S RACE (forthcoming 1994) (manuscript on file with author).

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In both the primary and general election, the minimal coverage that was undertaken focused predominantly on the horse race and questions of character rather than on substantive issues. In the primary, only twelve percent of television coverage of the election touched on issues, while in the general election, that figure stood at twenty-nine percent. The average length of a television news election story during the general election was fifty-four seconds. Moreover, only twenty-eight percent of television stories about the election used reporters. The remaining seventy-two percent of all stories about the campaign were relatively short pieces read by anchors, with video supplied by cameramen and editorial content derived from campaign press releases.⁶⁸ Research on the Philadelphia mayoral campaigns also revealed an extremely high reliance by local television newscasts on the lead of the major metropolitan newspaper, on the one hand, and on the press releases of the campaigns, on the other. The unsubstantiated personal charges of one candidate against the other were more often prominently reported by local television newscasts than by newspaper reporters.⁶⁹

In the following year, the senatorial election pitting incumbent Arlen Specter against political neophyte Lynn Yeakel was marked by similar trends. In the two-month period preceding the Fall election, campaign coverage represented 1.3% of the newscast (excluding time for commercials) on the station with the highest ratings in the market. The campaign pieces averaged fifty-three seconds in length. Of the forty-eight pieces that were aired, seventy-one percent focused on the horse race, seventeen percent were about the character of the candidates, and only thirteen percent mentioned substantive issues.⁷⁰

Research on media audiences suggests that local television news is a relatively uninformative news source. For example, Becker and colleagues found evidence that audience members who rely on local television for news and information have less knowledge of local public affairs than those who rely on newspapers. They explained their finding by suggesting that newspapers are more likely to focus on issues, while television news is more likely to focus on events and personalities.⁷¹ Clarke and Fredin have suggested that newspapers are superior to local television when it comes to helping people

68. Phyllis Kaniss, *Local Television News and the Coverage of the 1991 General Election Campaign* (Dec. 5, 1991) (unpublished manuscript, on file with author); Phyllis Kaniss, *Local Television News and the Coverage of the 1991 Mayoral Primary Campaigns* (June 2, 1991) (unpublished manuscript, on file with author).

69. KANISS, *THE MEDIA AND THE MAYOR'S RACE*, *supra* note 67.

70. Jonathan J. Cutler, *Local News & Local Campaigns: A Case Study of the Specter-Yeakel TV and Newspaper Coverage in Philadelphia* 31 (1993) (unpublished honors thesis, Annenberg School for Communication).

71. See generally Lee B. Becker et al., *Newspaper and Television Dependencies: Effects of Evaluations of Public Officials*, 23 J. BROADCASTING 465 (1979).

learn about political affairs.⁷² Similarly, Becker and Whitney found that people who depended on local television news for information on public affairs were "more likely to be low in knowledge" than those who relied on other sources.⁷³

In summary, the research suggests that local television news coverage of elections is lacking in two key dimensions: (1) coverage of most local campaigns is minimal and (2) when campaigns are covered, local television tends to cover the "easiest" aspects—i.e., the horse race or public appearances—instead of substantive issues.

To a large extent, these weaknesses may be traced to the jurisdictional fragmentation of the local television market and to local newscasts' limited reporting resources. In a market in which there are hundreds of political jurisdictions, no one race is viewed as having appeal to the entire regional market. In many markets, even senatorial and gubernatorial races affect only a segment of the audience, because a market may encompass more than one state.⁷⁴ In addition, the limited reporting resources mean that even when local television stations cover a campaign, they are forced to report on those aspects which are most accessible and least time-consuming to cover. To the extent that campaigns know how to package visual stories that make the job of the TV reporter easier, they are likely to get their angles on stories covered.

Given the way local television news has historically covered local campaigns, it is interesting to consider why coverage of the 1992 presidential election blossomed in some local television markets and to examine the quality of the resulting coverage.

C. Local Television Coverage of the 1992 Presidential Election

The presidential election of 1992 witnessed a major expansion in the role of local television news in campaign coverage. Local television news covered the campaign in four basic ways: (1) interviews with the presidential and vice-presidential candidates or their surrogates via two-way satellite hookups;⁷⁵ (2) visits by candidates or surrogates to local areas; (3) invitations to local TV

72. Peter Clarke & Eric Fredin, *Newspapers, Television, and Political Reasoning*, 42 PUB. OPINION Q. 143, 156 (1978).

73. Lee B. Becker & Charles Whitney, *Effects of Mass Media Dependencies: Audience Assessment of Government*, 7 COMM. RES. 95, 110 (1980).

74. In Kern's study of local television news of elections, she found that "in areas where the overlap of market size and district boundaries exists, advertising and newstime will be plentiful or extensive. In cases where overlap is not particularly good, there is little news and little advertising." MONTAGUE KERN, 30-SECOND POLITICS: POLITICAL ADVERTISING IN THE EIGHTIES 62 (1989).

75. See, e.g., Leslie Phillips, *Bush Campaigns Via Satellite, Local TV*, USA TODAY, Mar. 10, 1992, at 6A.

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reporters to visit George Bush in the White House⁷⁶ or on Air Force One,⁷⁷ or to travel with Bill Clinton on his bus tours;⁷⁸ and (4) satellite video feeds either directly from the candidates (called video news releases, or "VNRs") or from one of the national news feeds.

One study comparing local television news coverage of the presidential, senatorial and House campaigns in the Los Angeles market yielded some surprising results. Kiolbassa found that between February 12 and November 8, 1992, one local Los Angeles station presented 450 stories about the presidential campaign, as compared to only forty-three about the Senate races and one about the House elections. Similarly, on the second station in the market, there were 320 stories on the presidential campaign, and only fifty-one on the Senate and four on House races.⁷⁹

At first glance, it may seem strange that presidential campaigns would receive more coverage than local campaigns on local television news, and that given the record of local television news stations in their past coverage of local elections, the presidential election would be covered at all on local TV. But on closer examination, the factors presented earlier in this paper help explain why local TV news became an important vehicle for the transmission of national political messages in 1992.

One reason for the change was new technological capabilities. The 1992 election marked the first campaign in which most local television stations were able to use two-way satellite hookups to conduct live interviews with people in distant places. A Freedom Forum study of the presidential primaries, based on a nationwide survey of local television news directors, revealed that nearly half of all local television stations in the United States used satellite technology to get live interviews with the major presidential candidates. The survey also showed that this use of live satellite interviews had more than doubled since 1988. The study pointed out that the interviews involve little or no cost to the station, since the candidates typically pay for the cost of the satellite transponder.⁸⁰

Therefore, while presidential candidates have long sought positive local news coverage, it was only with the widespread dissemination of satellite technology that they were able to reach out to local news stations on a frequent and continuing basis. Before the use of satellites became common, campaigns

76. Phyllis Kaniss, *How The TV Locals Covered the President*, PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, Oct. 14, 1992, at A11.

77. See Ken Gullette, *Local News Gets Taken For a Ride*, COMMUNICATOR, Dec. 1992, at 18-19 (1992); Tom Feran, *Local Anchors Get Bush Treatment*, PLAIN DEALER, Nov. 3, 1992, at 12C.

78. May, *supra* note 3.

79. Jolene Kiolbassa, *Local Television News: President-Centered, Senate-Invisible in Los Angeles* 10-11 (Sept. 5, 1993) (unpublished paper presented to the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., on file with author).

80. THE FREEDOM FORUM MEDIA STUDIES CENTER, *COVERING THE PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES FROM WAUSAU TO WICHITA: COVERING THE CAMPAIGN VIA SATELLITE* 36 (1992).

could only secure local news coverage through the significant cost and time allocation of travel to an area. In 1992 they could gain access to a local television market for approximately \$1000—the cost of a satellite uplink—with no travel time required.⁸¹ Such satellite hookups allowed candidates to conduct interviews with local television anchors, as well as to send video news releases to local stations.

The more pervasive use of local television news by the campaigns in 1992 was also a result, in part, of the growing financial constraints on local news stations as they entered the 1990s and their increased need to gather news at a relatively low cost. Declining ratings and pressure from corporate owners to maintain high profit margins have forced many stations to cut back further on staffing levels. The 1992 presidential campaigns, recognizing these constraints, displayed considerable sophistication in supplying understaffed news programs with the kinds of stories they needed for their newscasts. For example, the Clinton bus trips provided an opportunity for many small-market television stations to gain the prestige of covering a presidential campaign at the cost of about \$100, as compared to approximately \$1000 a day to fly on a campaign plane.⁸²

The candidates also realized that they could reach large numbers of voters through a medium much less likely to be critical of them than either local newspapers or network news. One press assistant to former President George Bush was quoted during the campaign as saying, “[i]f you’re looking at a media strategy, you’ve got to tailor it to the marketplace. The reach of network news as an institution is not what it was ten years ago You’ve got to rely on local stations, cable, and ‘tele-conferencing.’”⁸³ In particular, fifteen media markets—estimated to represent some 241 electoral votes—were viewed as being crucial to the election: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Detroit, Cleveland, Seattle, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Sacramento, Denver, Baltimore, Hartford, and Portland. It was in those markets that the campaigns worked hardest to obtain local television news coverage.⁸⁴

There was another factor which encouraged the presidential campaigns to “bypass” network television in favor of the local stations: the growing sense that people trusted their local television personalities, particularly the local anchor, more than the network journalists. As a Clinton campaign staffer in charge of the campaign’s satellite operation stated, “[y]ou get a more local association because you are on with the local anchor . . . you are tying it back home, to people’s community.”⁸⁵

81. Leslie Phillips, *Bush Campaigns Via Satellite, Local TV*, USA TODAY, Mar. 10, 1992, at 6A.

82. May, *supra* note 3.

83. Phillips, *supra* note 81, at 6A.

84. Kenneth T. Walsh et al., *The Media Battle*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Aug. 31, 1992, at 49.

85. THOMAS ROSENSTIEL, *STRANGE BEDFELLOWS: HOW TELEVISION AND THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES CHANGED AMERICAN POLITICS* 313 (1993).

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It is also important to understand the reason why local television news stations were so eager to accept the stories being provided to them. As noted earlier, local television news has been faced with the dilemma common to all local news organizations: the need to find local news which can appeal to a politically fragmented news audience. While metropolitan newspapers have gotten around this dilemma to some extent by zoning their newspapers and assigning reporters to different suburban beats, local television stations simply do not have comparable resources. Instead, they must search for locally oriented stories which transcend narrow political boundaries and have appeal to an entire regional audience.

The presidential campaigns, as locally tailored by eager campaign media advisers, met these requirements almost perfectly. Both the Bush and Clinton campaigns recognized that they could receive ample and largely positive coverage on local television news by providing easily accessible, visual stories, having some local angle.⁸⁶ Candidate visits to key local landmarks created a uniquely local—and very visual—story for the station. When Bill Clinton and Al Gore hopped up onto the stage of the Grand Old Opry in Nashville,⁸⁷ they were not simply passing through town, but hand-delivering to television stations an excellent piece of distinctively local video. Similarly, when the Republicans prepared video news releases of local Republican politicians responding to the Democratic Convention, they found that most of the twenty key markets they were targeting used the responses.⁸⁸

Interviews with local anchors worked in the same way. As one of the few local personalities with regionwide identification, the anchor is herself a kind of local symbol. As with the other strategies, in scheduling an interview between a presidential candidate and a local anchor, the campaigns were supplying a local angle that could be shared by the entire regionwide audience and visuals that required very little further work by the television reporter. Therefore, while in 1988, presidential campaigns searched for a single visual, symbolic locale for a press conference to get across a national message for the day—for example, George Bush's speech before a flag factory—in 1992, the photo opportunities were to a great extent locally tailored.

It is important to note that whether the vehicle for local television news coverage was satellite interviews, personal visits with the candidate, local appearances, or video news releases, the candidates largely controlled their coverage. Since satellite interviews were typically conducted live, the cam-

86. Berkowitz and Adams have found that sources who know how to create local angles are much more likely to have their information accepted by local news organizations. BERKOWITZ & ADAMS, *supra* note 60.

87. Howard Kurtz, *Candidates' Road Shows Reroute News Coverage*, WASH. POST, Sept. 2, 1992, at A4.

88. Thomas B. Rosenstiel, *Struggle for TV Time Forces Candidates to Switch Tactics*, L.A. TIMES, Sept. 20, 1992, at A1.

paings could be assured that coverage would not be edited, as a network piece generally would be. As one media critic put it, "on live, a skilled politician owned the air."⁸⁹ In a similar way, candidates benefitted from rigidly controlled formats for interviews on locations. At the same time, visits to local landmarks allowed candidates the opportunity to associate themselves with positive local symbols with few critical questions to tarnish the imagery.

Perhaps most disturbing was the willingness of local television stations to accept VNRs provided directly from the candidates. The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center conducted research on the use of such VNRs, which they described as "pre-packaged segments of video that show a candidate in a favorable light. Shot and edited to look like news footage, VNRs are often indistinguishable from 'real' news footage."⁹⁰ The study found that while in 1988, twenty percent of local stations used candidate VNRs, by 1992 that figure had jumped to forty-three percent. In half of the cases, stations did not reveal the source of the video to viewers. Their conclusion was that "a television industry beset by budget cuts [is] relying rather uncritically on material provided directly by the candidates."⁹¹ Thus, the new involvement of local television news in national politics represented less a fresh commitment to serious reporting than a willingness by financially pressed stations to be used by the campaigns, which, in turn, were looking for an uncritical medium through which to reach a mass audience.

V. CONCLUSION

While the increased coverage of national campaigns by local television news may have reflected new budgetary constraints and a politically fragmented local audience more than any sense of civic responsibility, there were, in fact, a number of positive results from the change. First, in some cases local television stations provided extensive platforms through which candidates could get beyond the eight-second sound bite and explain their plans and proposals at length to citizens. For example, in markets like Louisville and Seattle, local television stations agreed to let candidates stage local town meetings on live television.⁹² These platforms did allow some discussion of the uniquely local aspects of national debates and tended to stay focused on substance rather than strategy or personal characteristics. Because of this willingness to provide lengthier discussion of substantive national issues, local television coverage

89. ROSENSTIEL, *supra* note 85, at 312.

90. MARK THALHIMER, THE FREEDOM FORUM MEDIA STUDIES CENTER, COVERING THE PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES 35 (1992).

91. *Id.* at 13.

92. See, e.g., Leslie Scanlon & Valerie Bott Kincaid, *Viewers Line Up to Fire Questions at Candidates*, COURIER J., July 20, 1992, at B1.

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of the campaign may have succeeded in dissipating some of the cynicism and apathy engendered by national journalists, and stimulating greater involvement by voters. Notably, these live town hall meetings had significant viewership. The Louisville town meeting, for example, was the highest rated program in its Monday evening time slot. A similar televised Clinton town hall meeting in Dallas finished second only to *Roseanne*, the highest-rated television show in the country.⁹³

But the new local television coverage of presidential elections also raised concerns. Because local television reporters do not specialize by beats, the journalist assigned to cover a presidential visit or to interview the President was not likely to have followed campaign issues the way a newspaper or network journalist had, and therefore was not likely to be as capable of asking informed questions about issues and proposals. In addition, the lack of reporting resources meant that local television stations were largely incapable of checking the claims presidential candidates made. For example, when George Bush was interviewed by one of Philadelphia's anchors, the former President claimed that his Administration had increased funding to cities, a misleading statement at best. While the networks, with their "truth squads," might have pursued the accuracy of such a claim, the local station let it stand unchallenged.⁹⁴ As a result of this kind of failure to check claims consistently, candidate appearances on local television news became little more than campaign advertising. In addition, local television news, while more willing than the networks to provide a platform for candidates' positions and proposals, was also more open to serve as a mere conduit for the candidates' carefully planned local photo opportunities. As network journalists did in 1988, local television journalists in 1992 largely allowed themselves to be used in return for good visuals for their stories.

There are also signs that the local television news strategy of presidential campaigns may shape the political communication strategies of presidencies. In the second month of his Administration, President Clinton embarked on a series of interviews with local television news anchors in an attempt to sell his economic reform package. His media strategy was unique: in every city to which he travelled, his staff set up a series of interviews with local TV anchors from several nearby television markets. Significantly, no newspaper reporters were invited to the sessions. The White House set rigid ground rules for the sessions, allowing little more than a few minutes for each station's interview. While some local anchors asked incisive questions, the format allowed virtually no time for follow-up questions. With some smaller market stations, the White

93. ROSENSTIEL, *supra* note 85, at 314.

94. Kaniss, *supra* note 76, at A11.

House allegedly fed the local anchors questions for the interview.⁹⁵ This case suggests that the use of local television news as a forum for the consideration of national issues may represent more a public relations strategy for the President than a unique platform for local debate on a national issue. In 1996, presidential campaigns will likely continue the relatively successful local news strategy of using local newscasts as the uncritical medium through which to transmit campaign messages.

At the same time, expanded coverage of national issues, and in particular presidential elections, has another disturbing implication. Americans are getting less and less coverage of local elections at the very time when increasing numbers of people are relying mainly or exclusively on local television news for information about those campaigns. A high-profile presidential campaign, where well-known national figures talk by satellite with the local anchor, is becoming increasingly preferable to stories about far less well-known candidates for local offices affecting only a portion of a regional market. While satellite technology is making live interviews with local legislators from Washington and state capitols more common, it actually seems to be discouraging the assignment of reporters and camera crews to cover campaigns much closer to home. Research from the Los Angeles market cited earlier suggests that there may have been a displacement effect: increased presidential campaign coverage diminished the coverage of more local races, in part because the presidential campaigns may have been more adept than those of Senate and House candidates in presenting appealing local news stories requiring minimal staff research.

As a result of such displacement, viewers are not receiving the information they need about local candidates, whether about their plans and proposals or their qualifications to solve local policy problems. In addition, the minimal nature of coverage discourages voter participation, while the nature of the coverage—focused as so much of it is on the horse race and questions of character—engenders cynicism that further depresses participation.

It is disturbing to note that advertising has filled the vacuum left by television's failure to cover local politics. Some media consultants have even shunned news coverage—which has the potential to be negative—in favor of getting their message out in the paid media, which can be completely controlled. As a result, campaign advertising for local races increasingly exceeds local television news coverage of those same elections.⁹⁶ Compounding the problem, local television newscasts have carried out few "adwatches" to check the claims of the advertisements their stations carry.

95. Phyllis Kaniss, *In Covering the President, Does TV Have More Access?*, PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, Feb. 25, 1993, at A15.

96. KERN, *supra* note 74, at 62.

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There should be genuine concern with the growing segment of the American public obtaining its information about both national and local elections from local television news. These newscasts have not committed reporting resources to providing their audiences with the kind of information they need to make choices in a democratic society. Increasingly, they are allowing themselves to be used by candidates who wish to transmit political messages through a highly uncritical medium. Unfortunately, only limited research has been carried out to show the extent of the weaknesses in such coverage. In the future, scholars need to undertake far more quantitative research on the amount and character of local television news election coverage across a variety of markets. They must also analyze the ways such coverage influences public opinion formation, candidate choice, and voter participation.