

Force feeding the news

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Abstract:

Television is to news as a bumper sticker is to Shakespeare. I remember hearing an analogy once that went something like that. Your typical nightly, 35-minute TV news broadcast is a headline service with pictures. Five minutes of police-blotter reporting - fires, murders, car accidents, etc. - five minutes of human-interest stories and small talk, five minutes of weather, five minutes of sports, ten minutes of commercials, and maybe a minute or two for business, science, politics, and affairs of the world.

I don't intend this as a slam on TV news. It is what it is. It's a business. Commercial TV news programmers work backwards from what they think the largest audience wants to see. They don't call it the mass media for nothing. If Jim Lehrer's "NewsHour" - a quality, in-depth show - moved from PBS to NBC and had to rely on ratings, it'd be off the air in a month. Why do you suppose "Nightline," with Ted Koppel, is on at 10:35, while "Friends" airs during prime time? TV news isn't there primarily to dispense information or even to offer "infotainment." Like everything else on commercial TV and radio, it's there to sell advertising to a mass audience. That's the business.

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Full Text:

Television is to news as a bumper sticker is to Shakespeare. I remember hearing an analogy once that went something like that. Your typical nightly, 35-minute TV news broadcast is a headline service with pictures. Five minutes of police-blotter reporting - fires, murders, car accidents, etc. - five minutes of human-interest stories and small talk, five minutes of weather, five minutes of sports, ten minutes of commercials, and maybe a minute or two for business, science, politics, and affairs of the world.

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I can live with that reality. While we might lament that citizens with a right and duty to vote aren't better informed, this is the kind of thing you must accept as a consequence of a free society. By contrast, in the repressive days of the former Soviet Union, legend has it that there were only two television stations. On Station 1, the Communist government spewed its propagandistic in-depth "news"; if you turned to Station 2, you saw a KGB man staring into the camera ordering you to turn back to Station 1. Would you like that better? Fortunately, in our media-abundant society, there are plenty of places you can go if you crave something more: Cable TV, talk radio, NPR, PBS, newspapers, magazines, books, the Internet, you name it. If you're not well informed, you have no one to blame but yourself. As for the masses, we can't lead or drag them to water, much less make them drink.

But that was before Rocky Mountain Media Watch came along. Actually, this pretentious undertaking is little more than a one-man show run by a liberal scold named Paul Klite. It's advisory board includes such media giants as David Barsamian from something called "Alternative Radio;" two representatives from Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (a fringe group so far left they think National Public Radio is too conservative); and someone from Greenpeace. You get a sense of where they're coming from.

Klite, who I've had on my radio show, rails against what he calls the "corporate media." This is a buzz word right out of the Ralph Nader school of public discourse. Lefties, you see, equate "corporate" with "bad." I see it as just a way of organizing a business, raising capital and paying taxes. As for "big corporations," what's the alternative? We already have big government and big labor. If you're going to live in a prosperous, mass- production industrial society you've got to have big businesses. Who else is going to make your cars, TVs, appliances, airplanes, groceries, etc.?

When Klite says "corporate," what he really means is "private" or "commercial." That's what offends him. When I pressed him, he conceded that what he'd prefer is more government-funded media. That way, we'd get the kind of information we really need, rather than what we want. Klite and his ilk, of course, would be there to decide what we need, what's best for us, untainted by commercialism. Since he regards NPR and PBS as too conservative, too establishment, you can be assured his recipe for our news diet would be rich in socialism. How he intends to force us to watch is another question.

Incidentally, the FCC recently threw out Rocky Mountain Media Watch's complaint asking that the licenses of four Denver TV stations not be renewed because their news coverage is too violent and trivial. Despair not, Mr. Klite, our glorious market economy offers you another remedy: Buy a TV station and try it your way. You can even incorporate, if you like. Mike Rosen's talk shows airs on 85 KOA, 9 a.m. to noon weekdays.

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