Spring 5-2004


Brandon Lynn Long
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

Follow this and additional works at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj

Recommended Citation

This is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Tennessee Honors Program at Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects by an authorized administrator of Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.
The Abolishment of the Non-Entertainment Programming Requirement and
the State of Radio News:
Effects on Tennessee's Major Markets Since 1985
Brandon L. Long, Research Scholar
Dr. Sam Swan, Faculty Mentor

The University of Tennessee Honors Program
African-American Achiever Scholar
Chancellor’s Scholar
Ronald E. McNair Scholar
The Abolishment of the Non-Entertainment Programming Requirement 
and
the State of Radio News:
Effects on Tennessee's Major Markets Since 1985

Abstract
Since federal deregulation of the broadcast industry in the early 1980s by the Federal Communications Commission and the United States Congress, the radio industry is perceived to have less non-entertainment programming as compared to 1985. Looking at Tennessee's major markets, Memphis, Nashville, and Knoxville, as examples, research evaluated how much non-entertainment programming radio stations produce, what radio decision-makers classified as news programming, and how many resources are devoted to news and public affairs programming. The research includes data from surveys and incorporates a mixed qualitative-quantitative survey design.
Table of Contents

Introduction..................................................................................................................4

Background..................................................................................................................4

How do people use radio in terms of news? ...............................................................6

Deregulation..................................................................................................................6

Radio: Post-Deregulation..............................................................................................8

Methodology.................................................................................................................10

Data Analysis..............................................................................................................12

Discussion....................................................................................................................17

Limitations of the Study.............................................................................................17

Conclusion....................................................................................................................17

Possible Future Research Topics.................................................................................18

References....................................................................................................................20

Acknowledgements.....................................................................................................21

Faculty Mentor Biography...........................................................................................21

McNair Scholar Biography...........................................................................................22
The Abolishment of the Non-Entertainment Programming Requirement and
the State of Radio News:
Effects on Tennessee's Major Markets Since 1985

Radio is a medium that seems to some to be withering away in terms of its importance to society. To others it is a frontier forgotten and waiting to be revisited—a source of revenue and information waiting to reach its full potential. The state of radio today is in a likely period of transition. Radio programmers are working to maximize their profits and create programming that appeals to their audience. Since deregulation in the 1980s, most radio stations have abandoned regular coverage of news in favor of popular programming; however, the stations that do have news formats promote traditional discussion over the broadcast airwaves through their common news-talk formats.

Background

The Radio Act of 1927 and the Communications Act of 1934 established a basis for government regulation of the broadcast industry. It is understood that the public owns the airwaves and that broadcasters consequently must serve in the public interest. This was known as a “trusteeship model of broadcasting”. The idea is that “only those most capable of serving the public interest are entrusted with a broadcast license”. What exactly the “public interest” is, however, has been a point of contention in the communications industry since the fledgling days of broadcasting.
The standard was set early on by the Federal Radio Commission (FRC). The FRC reviewed stations to investigate whether stations were “fulfilling [their] obligation to the listening public”. It implemented a set of tests that evaluated program specifications to see if they included things such as program diversity. The impact of the FRC’s initial oversight was regulation of the communications industry (Zechow, 2002).

The FRC later became the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Prior to the 1980s, radio stations were required to record every broadcast so that the FCC could review them in order to determine if the stations were meeting the aforementioned requirements for non-entertainment programming. Non-entertainment programming was the term used to refer to programs that served the public interest, such as public affairs programs, news, etc. The stations also were required to maintain a written broadcast log of all programs so that officials at the FCC could inspect them. (Le Duc, 1987).

The yearly labor of reviewing the mounds of paperwork that were associated with the oversight responsibilities took a toll on the bureaucracy, and as the philosophy about the purpose of government and its relationship with the media began to evolve, a new idea began to emerge: deregulation. Deregulation was a movement that began in the 1970s and culminated with aggressive legislation and rulings in the 1980s. The Federal Communications Commission and the Congress agreed that “with the growth in the number of radio stations and television stations, there was sufficient competition in
broadcasting that market forces would compel station owners and operators to operate in the public interest” (Bates, 1993).

*How do people use radio in terms of news?*

According to Lang in the Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science, radio listeners use radio in a number of ways when it comes to news; it serves as a different type of source for different households. It serves as a deliberative source for some; when radio news is used as a deliberative source it is used to cater to “the household’s deliberative and continuing interests; it is a passive form of receiving news. Radio news can also be a primary source for news to others; in that case, radio is considered the most important source for news. And still, to a much smaller population, radio can be an exclusive source of news where that concept relies on the “virtual exclusion of other sources” (Lang, 1956).

*Deregulation*

There was a time in the history of broadcasting that radio was the number one source for news and information (Lang, 1956). Radio regulations required stations to “operate in the public interest and necessity”. With the development of television and the growing popularity of the Internet, however, that dependence on radio faded and has spread to other sources. By FCC mandate, radio stations were required to broadcast a specific amount of news and public affairs programming each day (Hazlett &
Sosa, 1998). News and public affairs programming are collectively referred to as non-entertainment programming. Stations on the AM dial had to make eight percent of their total programming non-entertainment in nature. For example, if a radio station broadcasted programming twenty-four hours a day, then about 115 minutes of that day’s total broadcast had to be devoted to non-entertainment programming. Similarly, FM radio had to make about six percent of its total programming non-entertainment; that amounted to a minimum of 86 minutes for stations that broadcasted for twenty-four hours (1998).

In the late 1970s, conservatives in the broadcast industry started to make the argument that “any benefits resulting from government regulation had been eclipsed by economic costs”. They believed that all regulations should be removed and competition should be the only standard for determining broadcast programming (Slotten, 2000). So, the first major deregulation legislation affecting the modern broadcast industry and radio news was passed in 1981 in the form of a series of legislative acts taken by Congress and the FCC. Included in that legislation was the abolishment of the non-entertainment programming requirement.

According to Congressional testimony by FCC Commissioner James Quello, these changes were motivated by the financial burden that the broadcast industry was undertaking. He believed that FCC and Congressional intervention was necessary and warranted because of the financial state of the industry. He concluded that the state of the industry
jeopardized the stations’ ability to meet their public interest responsibilities (Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Finance, 1987). The 1981 Report and Order by the FCC stated:

“We believe that, given conditions in the radio industry, it is time to . . . permit the discipline of the marketplace to play a more prominent role . . . Simply stated, the large number of stations in operation, structural measures, and listenership demand for certain types of program (and for limitations on other types of programming, to wit: commercials) provide an excellent environment in which to move away from the content/conduct type of regulation that may have been necessary for other times, but that is no longer necessary in the context of radio broadcasting to assure operation in the public interest” (Hazlett & Sosa, 1998).

In short, the goal of the 1981 deregulation was to simplify the broadcast license renewal process. The commission believed that “the enormous savings in time and money could be used for more constructive purposes in programming and news” (Hazlett & Sosa, 1998).

Radio: Post-Deregulation

According to Underwood, radio should be considered an example of what can happen if there is no government regulation and if the market is left to determine the amount of news broadcasted. He found that after deregulation stations that had previously been under government pressure to
produce news programming had eliminated news personnel and purged news segments (1998). Furthermore according to Congressional hearing records, Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) research from 1985 concluded that “all broadcast news departments lost a [sic] least one full-time person in 1985-‘86” (Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Finance, 1987). The RTNDA also found out that the cutbacks amounted to 2,000 full-time positions; those positions were replaced by 700 part-time positions (Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Finance, 1987).
Methodology

The research investigated how deregulation has affected radio news, specifically in Tennessee since 1985. It incorporated a mixed qualitative-quantitative survey design. The goal was to address the apparent decline in the number of radio stations that cover news, the perceived decline in the amount of time devoted to news daily, and explain why these perceptions linger. Specifically, a short survey with a mixed number of quantitative and qualitative items was administered via telephone to news personnel at three radio stations in Tennessee; one each from Memphis, Nashville, and Knoxville.

In order to compare the current state of the industry with the past, the research depended on facts coalesced from primarily two directories, Broadcasting Cablecasting Yearbook 1985 and Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook 2003-2003. Then, that information was compared to the data retrieved from surveys.

After reviewing the directories and analyzing the surveys, data was divided into several categories. Using the directories for reference, information was divided to determine if the station has a person in charge of news or public affairs—a news director or public affairs director, does the station have a news staff, if it does how large or small, etc.

A telephone survey was administered to three radio stations. In the telephone survey, three radio stations were asked how many people were employed to gather news for the news department and to distinguish the
number of full-time employees versus the number of part-time employees. They were also asked to describe their news philosophy and why they think most radio stations are abandoning news.

In summary, the methodology used sought to compare how the radio news landscape in 1985 and prior to deregulation compares to the present radio news landscape since deregulation’s effects have started to settle on the Tennessee broadcast industry.
Data Analysis

The purpose of this research was to define deregulation in terms of radio news and the effect that it has had upon Tennessee’s major markets by looking at Memphis, Nashville, and Knoxville.

According to Broadcasting Cablecasting Yearbook 1985, ten Memphis radio stations listed had a news director that was responsible for news programming. Ten radio stations in Nashville also had a designated news director. Knoxville had only seven radio stations with a news director listed in the directory. By the 2002-2003 publication of the Broadcasting Cablecasting Yearbook the number of stations with a news presence increased for all three cities.

Overall, it seems as though more personnel were devoted to news in 2002. In Memphis, the directory identified seven stations with news directors, but fourteen total with a news presence, including two stations with more than one person identified as news staff. In Nashville, the directory indicated that there were only three news directors in the city, but eleven stations with a news presence. Three stations in Nashville had identified themselves as having news staffs, one notably, WMS-AM, had twelve people on staff.

A telephone survey was administered to various news staff at three radio stations: WREC-AM in Memphis, WLAC-AM in Nashville, and WNOX-AM in Knoxville. They were all asked the same set of questions with no
time limit for a response. All three stations indicated that they had a news/talk format.

Source A was interviewed from WREC-AM in Memphis, Tennessee; A is on the news staff at the station as an anchor/reporter. The station is owned by Clear Channel Communications. It broadcasts about seven hours of news per day and derives its news from a variety of sources, including station reporters, producers, other specific news staff, satellite feed services, WPTY-TV, a Clear Channel television station, the Associated Press, and the Clear Channel Network. WREC has a news staff of four, one of whom is a part-time employee. Of the total amount of news aired daily 20 to 29 minutes of it come from a straight satellite feed. WREC is responsible for news on several other Memphis Clear Channel stations, including WEGR-FM. When A was asked, “Do you believe that your bosses consider your news department expendable?” A responded, “No, it’s the basis of what we do.” This indicates that there is little known threat to the elimination of the news format or the news department. The station’s guiding philosophy of news was “local, live, and immediate”; this radio station still makes and effort to cover breaking news. Some stations simply do not have the resources to indicate such a commitment according to data from the Broadcasting Cable Yearbook. It broadcasts very little entertainment news, typically only during the morning program. A also indicated that most Clear Channel FM radio stations in Memphis broadcast about a minute worth of news during their morning shows.
Source B was interviewed from WLAC-AM in Nashville, Tennessee; B is on the news staff at the station as an anchor/reporter. The station is also owned by Clear Channel Communications. It broadcasts over ten hours news of per day and derives its news from a variety of sources, including station reporters, producers, other specific news staff, satellite feed services, the Associated Press, and the Clear Channel Network. WLAC has a news staff of twelve, two of which are part-time employees. WLAC only uses straight satellite feeds to broadcast news on weekends. WLAC is responsible for news on five other Nashville Clear Channel stations. For example, it provided news during the war and may provide a minute of news content for entertainment stations during their morning programs. When B was asked, “Do you believe that your bosses consider your news department expendable?” B responded, “No, it is vital.” B then went on to suggest that this news station has a strong commitment to continue to cover news. When looking at news, this station thought it was important to be a primary source of information in times of crisis. Decision-makers ask themselves “is it something of interest to the community or does it affect the community?” It broadcasts very little entertainment news, typically only during the morning program. It is also noteworthy to mention that both WREC-AM and WLAC-AM are a part of the Tennessee Radio Network, which is comprised of Clear Channel radio stations in Tennessee; this network makes it easy for radio news stations to share information across the state. Through this agreement, it is possible for a WLAC-AM reporter to be covering a story and broadcasting
live from a scene in Nashville and the broadcast be heard on several
Memphis, Nashville, and Chattanooga stations.

Source C was interviewed from WNOX-AM in Knoxville, Tennessee; C is on the news staff in a management position at the station. The station is owned by Citadel Broadcasting. It broadcasts about ten hours of news per day and derives its news from a variety of sources, including station reporters, producers, other specific news staff, satellite feed services, an information sharing agreement with a local television station WVLT-TV, a Gray Communications television station (not related to Citadel), the Associated Press, news releases, regional newspapers, and telephone tips. WNOX has a news staff of eight, four of whom are part-time employees. Of the total amount of news aired daily over 40 minutes of it come from a straight satellite feed. The amount of news from WVLT-TV is an “unpredicted amount” and is usually utilized more during breaking news or severe weather coverage. WNOX-AM is responsible for news on other Knoxville Citadel stations, including WIVK-FM, the most listened to station in the market and WNOX-FM, which simulcasts many WNOX-AM programs. When C was asked, “Do you believe that your bosses consider your news department expendable?” C responded, “No opinion.” It is unclear what exactly this implies; however, it could be suggested that subject C was either uncomfortable with the answer to this question or truly did not know and had no opinion. The “no opinion” option was included in the survey so that non-attitudes would not be measured. When C was asked his/her opinion on why
radio stations were abandoning news, he/she responded “news is labor intensive and costly; if radio ownerships compare what they say they want—and its not news—then in most cases it’s not worth the cost.” The station’s guiding philosophy of news was “information that’s useful to people that gives them a timely concept of what is going on in their community, region, and nation”; he also said that the information given should “help audience members make decisions about how they want to lead their lives”.

Overall, these sources, A, B, and C, have a good grasp of what their obligation to the public is. Through their responses to the qualitative questions I was able to ascertain their commitment to news and it was generally firm.

In comparing the data from Radio Contacts 1986, Bacon’s Radio Directory, Broadcasting Cablecasting 1985, and Broadcasting Cable 2002-2003, the amount of radio news overall has decreased. The amount of news on news/talk stations has increased. The amount of news on entertainment formatted radio stations has decreased.
Discussion

Limitations of the Study

One of the major limitations of this study was the amount of research available on the broadcast industry, specifically in Tennessee.

Another limitation was the amount of research conducted that investigates radio news. It seems as if radio news is a neglected area of research. Scholars are focusing their attention on television news, the internet, and the convergence of media. Future research should include analysis based upon actual broadcasts and not necessarily the observations of radio station news personnel.

The fact that the directory did not indicate whether or not those listed were responsible for multiple duties was also a limitation. For example, the telephone survey data suggested that in some stations the person with the title news director may have also been the programming director, so his/her full attention was not devoted to news.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 and corporate mergers were not attributed to the changes—another limitation.

Conclusions

Radio news in Tennessee is on the decline. There are fewer sources of news. Take WREC-AM and WLOC-AM for example; both are owned by Clear Channel Communications and are a part of the Tennessee Radio Network. Not only that, but WREC shares news with at least one other radio
station WEGR-FM (Memphis). WLOC-AM shares news with five other stations in Nashville. So it can be said that those two stations provide news for six other stations.

The problem is that a small number of people are in control of the information. While there is diversity in programming in radio as a result of deregulation and listener demand, there is not a diverse number of voices delivering and seeking the news.

From the examining the directories, it was clear that there are more radio stations broadcasting since 1985, but few of those are news stations. There are places on the radio dial to go to find news on the radio, although they are few in number.

From the qualitative survey question responses, they suggest that news personnel understand their role; in many instances, they just are not financially able to put many more resources towards news.

From the quantitative survey question responses, the data reveals that fewer radio stations are doing more with less. Many of the news/talk radio stations have cut the size of their news staffs, but are producing more non-entertainment programming with those smaller staffs.

Possible Future Research Topics:

• What does the future hold for radio news?
• What is the current state of radio news’ impact on democracy (taking into consideration convergence and corporate mergers)?
• What should citizens do if they have a problem with the amount of news on their local radio stations?

• How might the survey data gathered in this study be different from observational data if a researcher recorded and analyzed what was actually broadcast.
References


Acknowledgements

Faculty Mentor Biography

Dr. Sam Swan’s professional experience spans 30 years in the broadcast industry.

He received a Bachelor of Science degree and Master of Science degree from Southeast Missouri State University and Central Missouri State University, respectively. He then went on to receive a Doctor of Philosophy degree from The University of Missouri-Columbia in Communications in 1978.

Swan began his professional experience as an undergraduate in Cape Girardeau, Missouri as a news reporter and anchor for KFVS-TV and KFVS-AM, where he later became the news director. He has progressed to his current position as a Professor at The University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He is responsible for the production of UT Today, a weekly news magazine produced by broadcasting students, and he teaches international journalists and broadcasters around the world through workshops in cooperation with the Voice of America.
McNair Scholar Biography

Brandon L. Long is a senior at The University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He expects to complete a Bachelor of Science degree in Communications in May 2004. Mr. Long is majoring in Broadcasting and Political Science and plans to go on to graduate school. At Tennessee, Mr. Long holds offices in several campus organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Student Government Association (SGA). He sets himself apart as a scholar on several levels; he is an African-American Achiever Scholar, a Chancellor’s Scholar, a Ronald McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Scholar, and a brother of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.

Mr. Long grew up in Memphis, Tennessee and graduated from Central High School in 2000. He remains active in his community in Memphis by volunteering at his former elementary school (Oakhaven Elementary School) as a mentor.