



MEDIA NOTES

Watching TV News More and Learning Less?

The Good News? It's Not Your Imagination.

The Bad News? It's Going to Get Worse.

Running from the News

Journalism's greatest tradition is the reporter willing to do anything and go anywhere to get her or his story. Times have changed, as evidenced by a recent encounter between the local media and tax activists at Portland's main post office last April 15. The activists, which included members of Portland Jobs with Justice, invited a reporter sitting in a nearby news truck to observe a skit the group was performing on tax reform. When the reporter refused the third invitation from the group – including a request to just talk with someone for a few minutes off-camera about the issue, the activists formed a picket line around the truck and began chanting for the reporter to come out. Did the reporter begin calling in the story of a journalist under siege? No. Instead, he and his camera man dashed through the picket line and into the safety of the post office.

If it bleeds, it leads. The cliché about how editors choose stories for the evening news is turning out to be true. That's what the Rocky Mountain Media Watch found in Portland's television news market as reported in the May 1997 issue of *Oregon Business*.

The media watchdog group conducted a one-day, 100-station survey of television news broadcasts. What they found was very disturbing for anyone who relies on television as their primary news source. On average, every thirty-minute news broadcast only committed 12 minutes – 39.8% – of the entire broadcast to actually reporting the news. Advertising took up another 30% of evening news programs, while sports, weather and promotions used up the remaining air time.

That 12-minute window on the world, however, provided a less than distorted view. Rocky Mountain Media Watch found that on average, 42% of that 12 minutes was dedicated to violence – street crime, domestic violence, war

and various natural disasters.

What of the remaining seven minutes? Unfortunately, television news programs were not using the remaining time covering the local economy, labor struggles, community development or other real issues. In its survey, Rocky Mountain Media Watch also developed a "fluff index" measuring the time spent on soft news, celebrity stories, and the maddeningly wooden exchanges between anchors that is supposed to pass for conversation. The average "fluff" turned out to be 39% or just under three minutes. That leaves just four minutes out of every 30-minute news broadcast for real community news.

Turning to the specific numbers for the Portland market does not bring relief from these dismal statistics. Portland's KGW, the local NBC affiliate, rang with 51.2% of its 12 minutes of news being dedicated to shootings, stabbings and other assaults on body and senses. KGW's competitors fared little better (see box at left). In the fluff department, KATU, Portland's ABC affiliate, took first place with a 49.7% rating. The economics of the market, meanwhile, promises to push Portland even further down this path.

Local broadcast news has become big money for local stations. Unlike the national news feeds which are loaded with national commercials whose revenues are going back to the networks, local news advertising time belongs entirely to the local station. While stations have avoided disclosing the exact dollar figures, television news programs are generally seen as the most profitable parts of the broadcast day, with estimates on the net profits running as high as 40%. That translates into as much as \$40,000 per day for each local station or as high as \$15 million annually.

Those figures will probably go even higher now that Portland has moved into the top 25 of television markets. The impacts of that move up the ladder is already evident in the aggressiveness of the stations during sweeps and non-sweeps months. Fires like the recent one that nearly claimed the historic Hollywood Theater drew every available helicopter and skycam during several hours of live broadcasts. Issues like budget cutbacks due to Measure 47 or the closure of Oregon's state parks, on the other hand, receive only passing mention.

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Portland's Mayhem and Fluff Ratings

Percentage of 12 minutes of each 30 minute news broadcast dedicated to "news" spent on "mayhem and fluff."

	KATU (ABC)	KOIN (CBS)	KGW (NBC)
Mayhem	38.4%	33.1%	51.2%
	4.6 min.	3.9 min.	6.2 min
Fluff	49.7%	32%	28.2%
	3.7 min.	2.6 min	1.6 min

*Percentages have been rounded up to nearest tenth. Figures from Rocky Mountain Media Watch national survey of 100 television stations.