

TV News That Looks Local, Even if It's Not

By Jim Rutenberg with Micheline Maynard

When viewers in Flint, Mich., tuned in to the Fox 66 "News at 10" last Thursday night, the station's resident firebrand, Mark Hyman, was at the ready to serve up some passionate punditry.

"Black, Asian and Hispanic seniors are graduating from colleges this spring in ethnically themed ceremonies that are out of bounds for whites," Mr. Hyman, the station's commentator, inveighed. Before passing the camera's attention back to his colleagues on the Flint news team, he added, "Segregated ceremonies have no place in America's college campuses."

If Mr. Hyman's tan looked out of place in central Michigan, or if his commentary seemed ill suited to a city with a large population of minority groups, there was good reason. Mr. Hyman was actually in a studio just outside Baltimore, not sharing a set with the Flint news team. As he does most nights, Mr. Hyman also addressed audiences of local news programs in cities across the country, including Pittsburgh, Oklahoma City and Rochester, from right where he sat in Hunt Valley, Md.

Mr. Hyman is part of a national team of anchors, commentators and weathercasters that, when plans are complete, will report for all 62 television stations owned by the Sinclair Broadcast Group. Sinclair calls it "Central Casting." To the company, it is an efficient way to cut the costs of local journalism, bringing news to small stations that otherwise would go without.

But to opponents of a proposal before the Federal Communications Commission to loosen media ownership rules, the set in Maryland is a frightening sign of things to come.

Today the commission is expected to enact new rules that will allow media companies to increase the percentage of the national television audience they can reach from 35 to possibly 45. It is also expected to make it easier for companies to own two or even three stations in a single market — or a newspaper and television station in a single market.

For all of the derision local news sometimes takes for segments about surfing dogs or waterskiing squirrels, it has become a focal point in the complicated debate over media consolidation.

Several civic groups have warned that the more stations a company like Sinclair can own, the more likely that company will make all those stations similar — often based on its own out-of-town taste or political disposition.

"The goal is homogenization in order to contain costs," said Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy, a group fighting deregulation. "But that homogenization creates a kind of cookie-cutter blandness."

Station owners say that such predictions overlook the complexities of the television business: broadcast stations ultimately succeed by offering viewers quality newscasts with unique local programming.

"We don't want to be limited in our ability to grow because of some bogeyman out there," said Fred Reynolds, president of the Viacom Television Stations Group.

Those opposed to deregulation say that there is already an example that proves Mr. Reynolds's bogeyman could become real for the American television audience: Clear Channel Communications.

After the F.C.C. loosened radio station ownership caps in the mid-1990's, Clear Channel's radio group grew from 36 stations to nearly 1,200. It has been criticized for having similar music

lineups across the country, and for passing off some D.J.'s who are really in San Diego or other cities as if they were broadcasting directly from stations in smaller towns. (The company says it has only done this in a small percentage of its stations and that it gives its local program directors far more control than its critics acknowledge.)

"We can point to experience on the radio side as the canary in the mine shaft, showing where we're going," said Andrew Jay Schwartzman, president of the Media Access Project, a consumer advocacy group.

Advocates like Mr. Schwartzman cite various examples where consolidated television station ownership, which was allowed to occur under waivers from the commission, has led to the loss of a distinct local news voice.

For instance, after Viacom acquired KCAL-TV in Los Angeles last year it merged its news operations with the CBS station it owns there, turning two separate newsrooms into one.

Likewise, Clear Channel merged the news operations of its two television stations in Jacksonville, Fla., WAWS and WTEV.

But Sinclair has caused the most stir with Central Casting.

The experiment began in late October at Sinclair's Flint station, WSMH, a Fox affiliate. WSMH's new 10 p.m. newcast begins with a Flint-based team that presents seven minutes of local news. After a commercial break, an anchor on a similar set in Maryland presents national and international news, which is also delivered live to other Sinclair stations around the country with a graphic that labels it "News Central." At another point, the Flint-based anchor may banter about the frigid local weather with one of the meteorologists in the Maryland studio who will act as if he were in Flint. On Friday, Scott Padgett, a Sinclair anchor in Baltimore, said there would be a high of "57 for us here in Flint."

With such centralized reports, said Mr. Hyman, who doubles as Sinclair's vice president for corporate relations, the Flint station could finally afford a news program. On its own, he said, the station would have needed the 30 or more staff members its competitors employ to produce news programs. With help from the central Sinclair news desk, he said, it needs only 18. "What we're doing we could not do if we only had a single station in Flint," Mr. Hyman said. And the station's news staff, he said, is free to focus on local issues.

Since October, Sinclair has rolled out Central Casting to Raleigh, N.C., Oklahoma City, Pittsburgh and Rochester. In the next 60 days, seven more markets are to get the feed, including Tampa, Fla., and Birmingham, Ala. The centralized news desk, Mr. Hyman said, will ultimately allow the company to bring news programs to 30 news-bereft television stations — most of them WB, UPN or Fox affiliates in medium and small markets.

The other Sinclair stations that do have local news programs will also become part of the system, sharing camera time with the staff members at Central Casting. Most of the local news programs' sets will eventually be identical to the one in Maryland, Mr. Hyman said.

Instead of criticizing the company, Mr. Hyman said, advocates "ought to be applauding us."

But Sinclair's new newcasts have received mixed reviews. James Bleicher, news director of the ABC station in Flint, WJRT, credited Sinclair with introducing a news program to an area that could use more and for showing some initiative in its local reporting. For instance, on Friday it included a locally produced "investigation" into whether warehouse clubs were cheaper than local grocery stores. But, he said, "It's a pretty disjointed newcast — there's a local

segment and then they go away. They've had very little connectivity with the home audience here."

(The New York Times Company owns stations that compete with those owned by Sinclair in Oklahoma City, Des Moines, Iowa, and Norfolk, Va.)

Many of Sinclair's competitors said they would not follow its lead too closely, because they would not want to risk losing the connection they have with their audience.

"If you consistently air a high-quality, serious newscast that reflects a local community's interests, you can create this kind of durable relationship with viewers that is a powerful asset from a business point of view," said Robert W. Decherd, chief executive of Belo, an owner of television stations and newspapers.

Mr. Reynolds of Viacom said: "We're in the business of making money. The more diverse you are, the bigger audience you'll garner. Why in the world would we want to have the same voice across multiple television stations?"

Though critics in Los Angeles have complained that the same reporters have shown up on both Viacom-owned stations there, Mr. Reynolds said, the one newsroom now serving them has more people to devote to big local stories than the separate newsrooms had combined.

Others, like the News Corporation, note that they have resisted merging news divisions at the stations they own in the same markets.

But opponents of deregulation said the media companies were on their best civic behavior so as not to cause any controversy while the F.C.C. makes a decision in their favor.

"They're sitting, waiting for the sword of consolidation to fall," said Mona Mangan, executive director of the Writers Guild of America East, which represents screen writers. "We have every confidence that the economies of scale will prove irresistible to these corporations."

The New York Times
June 2, 2003