

The growth of TV news, the demise of the journalism profession

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Abstract

In response to the dearth of critical literature on the transformation of local news ownership structure and the impacts of technological reorganization of news production on the television profession and local communities, we analyze the consolidation of local news and the paradox of expanded news hours in times of shrinking staffs and less-trusting audiences. Focused on Portland, Oregon, characterized as one of America's most civically active cities and a top-25 market, we interviewed many key workers from among the city's four television newsrooms. Despite having union representation, once discrete news production professionals and functions have been radically integrated, resulting in a multitasked news staff forced to provide fast-turnaround for multiple platforms, while seriously weakening investigative reporting, the quality of news production, and the utility of local news for the community.

Keywords

democracy, journalism, labor, news, political economy, technology, television, unions, urban community

Despite the ever-growing range of sources for news, 78% of Americans report they still get their daily news from local television stations (Waldman, 2011), thereby making it a crucial source of information. One would therefore reasonably expect for local television newsrooms in a democratic society to provide a wide range of citizen-oriented

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information, preparing the public for civic engagement. However, there is broad criticism of newsrooms in general for focusing too much on celebrity gossip and commercial promotion (Bennett, 2009; Higgins and Sussman, 2007; McAllister, 2002) while shortchanging hard-hitting political coverage (Bennett, 2009; Kaplan et al., 2005).

It is not only media critics and academics who are not impressed; 63% of surveyed Americans reported that they do not trust the news they receive from television, a percentage that continues to grow (Pew Research Center, 2009). In 2012, a record low 21% Americans had 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in TV news (Gallup Politics, 2012). And yet, there is more local news programming than ever: a 35% rise from 2004 to 2011 (Waldman, 2011: 13).

Observing this growing gap between quantity and quality of news, this study seeks to determine whether this is related to a decline in working conditions in local news media. While there are numerous factors that determine what information is broadcast, few academic studies have critically examined contemporary conditions of *producing* TV news and what goes on in the newsroom. This study looks at the underlying political economy on local news production and focuses specifically on the labor conditions of newsroom personnel. We spoke with long-time newswriters about their experiences, which invoked such issues as technology-based layoffs, reductions in status (full-time to part-time), reduced real income and benefits for crew, multitasking without commensurate pay, disregard for professional knowledge and experience, and abrupt dismissals of long-term talent and other employees. We also sought out the perspectives of those who either support or are skeptical of unionization.

Our urban focus is the top-25 media market of Portland, Oregon, where we work, respectively, as a television professional and media studies educator. Portland is a city that prides itself on the active engagement of its urban planners and high levels of citizen participation in public affairs (see Putnam and Feldstein, 2003). It has a well-managed public transit system and careful oversight of its environmental assets, but does it also provide citizens with the information they need for understanding public policy issues from the principal infrastructure of public information – local television newscasts? Is the performance of local, commercially regulated TV news consistent with the need of healthy civic values (environmental protection, good public transit, a well-enforced urban growth boundary) for which the city is known? Are private market prerogatives privileged over and dysfunctional to the social utility of an active professional, publicly oriented news system?

The current state of local television

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 permitted greater ownership consolidation of the television industry and the deregulation of business and broadcast practices and encouraged aggressive attacks on organized labor in the industry. In looking at the impacts of the new broadcast economy and neoliberal business culture, we wish to apply this framework toward understanding present-day function of local news, to what extent it is actually 'local' and to what degree the ideals of professional journalism are being upheld.

It is well established that television audiences have been in a slow but steady decline since the 1980s. The expansion of local commercial stations' news time, typically the

main or *only* local content that they air, is not about offering audiences a greater range of news but is rather principally an effort to capture more of the local advertising dollar. During the recession in 2011, local TV station revenue rose 17% (the highest of any news medium), primarily through increases in auto and political ads (Pew Research Center, 2011a),¹ even as audiences decreased 1.5%. Yet, local broadcast news revenues are at their highest levels since 2006 (Papper, 2011). In the fourth quarter of 2010, profit margins for TV station groups grew by 10 points over the same period in 2009, reaching 40% in a 15-company survey, with revenues reaching \$371.8 million (Facebook, 2011).

What gives news such an advantageous market opportunity? It is cheaper to produce news than to purchase other programming – resulting in an increase in local weekday news broadcasts from 3.7 hours in 2003 to 5.6 hours in 2010 (Papper, 2011). This increase in local weekday news broadcasts has been undertaken while significantly shrinking staff, with local television newsrooms down nearly 1300 positions in 2011 compared to four years earlier (Papper, 2011). At the same time, stations continued to add news slots. A Federal Communications Commission (FCC) assessment states that while local stations on the whole are providing more news, their quality is poorer than in the past, in part a result of the staff cutbacks and significant reductions in investigative reporting on community issues (Waldman, 2011: 13, 76–9). The combination of profit-seeking by owners and the speeding-up of news production in a competitive, multimedia, 24/7 news environment has been lethal to the surviving workers pressed into servicing the growing productivity demands of media capitalists.

Where does the public fit into the news business? Liberal democracies are assumed to rely on news organizations to act as ‘watchdogs’ – to analyze the behavior of important institutions and hold them publicly accountable for their actions. Local stations used to employ journalists who specialized in specific subject areas – city hall, education, health, consumer reports – to deliver enterprising, informative, and original stories. These journalists built years of trust with community sources (Marszalek, 2011; Waldman, 2011). But in an age when reporters are required to put out multiple stories over multiple platforms, newsroom managers see such ‘beat’ reporting as financially inexpedient. One estimate is that just 10% of newsrooms currently employ a beat system, mainly in larger markets. It is difficult to have beats while reducing staff (Marszalek, 2011). Replacing beats with easier-to-cover stories, such as crime and fires, has become the preferred routine (Killebrew, 2005; Klinenberg, 2005). This parallels national networks and newspapers that have eliminated regional and international news bureaus.

In a political economic system that supposedly fosters competition and choice, news organizations in fact avoid diversity and turn instead to standardized, formulaic products. Of local television stations in the United States, 59% are involved in some sort of cooperative news gathering or coverage agreement with another medium (Papper, 2011). Nearly 70% of stations have a ‘three-screen’ approach, producing news for television, web, and mobile applications. Almost all news stations (92%) are engaging in social networking (Papper, 2011), which means that news is now transmitted over websites and Twitter, and these same audience communities (‘prosumers’) are providing unpaid and untrained crowdsourced labor, as well as feedback on news content.

Table 1. Portland television ownership and union structure.

Station	Affiliation	Ownership	Notes	Union
KOIN	CBS	LIN Media – Providence, RI	5th owner since 2000	NABET
KGW	NBC	Belo Corp – Dallas	Provides news also for KRCW	AFTRA, IBEW, IATSE
KATU	ABC	Fisher Broadcasting – Seattle	Has always been owned by Fisher	IATSE, IBEW
KPTV	Fox	Meredith Corp. – Des Moines	In duopoly with KPDX; 3rd owner since 2000	None – formerly IBEW/AFTRA
KPDX	MyNetwork TV	Meredith Corp. – Des Moines	In duopoly with KPTV. Was Fox affiliate until 2002	None
KRCW	The CW	Tribune – Chicago	Airs newscast produced by KGW	None

Sources: Station and various industry websites. KGW and KATU were slated to be taken over, respectively, by Gannett (McLean, Virginia) and Sinclair (Hunt Valley, Maryland) in late 2013.

Ownership structure and restructuring

The lifting of restrictions on cross-media ownership, particularly since the Telecommunications Act of 1996,² escalated the conglomeration of broadcast properties and led to the integration of multiple media under single corporate roofs: 90% of American media is currently owned by just six corporations, down from 50 in 1983. (Lutz, 2012). Major media conglomerates own a wide range of television stations, film studios, publishing houses, music labels, internet services, and even video games. It is exceedingly attractive to vertically integrate media inasmuch as almost all are produced in digital formats and therefore easily lend themselves to cross-media promotion through in-house media outlets and directly to the social networks of audiences. Increasingly, conglomerates own not only an array of media content companies but also the means of distribution. In television, the five largest companies control 75% of prime-time viewing. These same companies also own the overwhelming proportion of TV program production (Center for Creative Voices, 2011).

At the local level, the same logic of television consolidation exists. Portland, Oregon is the 22nd largest television market in the United States (Nielsen, 2012). Each of Portland's commercial stations is affiliated with one of the major national networks, but none is network owned. Nor are they locally (i.e. Oregon) owned. Rather, each is part of a media chain whose corporate control is based in another state (see Table 1), what Thorstein Veblen (1923) called 'absentee ownership'. This outside ownership structure is central to what many of the people in the industry we interviewed see as the demise of the industry.³ Table 2 summarizes the scale of media cross-ownership of these companies.

Portland's ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox affiliates house their own locally based newsrooms. Fox affiliate KPTV, and the MyNetworkTV (formerly UPN) affiliate, KPDX, are part of a duopoly (i.e. a single corporate entity running two stations). This particular arrangement, which began in 2002, resulted in the locating of Fox and then-UPN stations

Table 2. Cross-media ownership of Portland's commercial TV companies.

Owner	Television holdings	Print holdings	Selected other holdings
Meredith Corp.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 local stations nationwide • 2 duopolies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21 subscription titles, 90 special interest titles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meredith Books • Meredith Video Services • <i>Better Recipe.com</i> • Belo Interactive
Belo Corp.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 local stations nationwide • 5 duopolies • 6 news-specific cable stations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Print properties spun off under A.H. Belo 	
Fisher Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 local stations in WA, OR, ID, and CA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No print 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 radio stations • Buzz Brands • Fisher Interactive Network • Fisher Pathways • Fisher Plaza
LIN Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 43 local stations • 7 digital channels nationwide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No print 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RM Media
Tribune Company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23 local stations nationwide • 3 duopolies • WGN America 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 English-language papers • 3 Spanish-language papers • 17 'other' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 radio station • 6 classified advertising ventures • <i>zap2it.com</i>, Tribune Media Services, Tribune Direct

Sources: Parent company websites.

in one building, thereby combining their operations and newsroom staffs. This led not only to staff layoffs for both stations but also to fears within the newsroom that corporate bottom line thinking was waylaying the public interest function of news (Ames Carlin, 2002).

This is a legitimate fear, as Meredith Corp., owner of the KPTV-KPDX duopoly, is publicly owned and traded on the New York Stock Exchange. In fact, all five corporate owners are financially beholden not only to their principal owner(s) but also to corporate stockholders, a structure not lost on station employees. When Meredith Corporation took over what is now Fox 12, for example, the station went from a having a smaller 'family' feel to a place where, according to a video editing manager and newscast editor, the 'bottom line was everything. Profits were everything. Integrity took a backseat to making money' (interview, 24 January 2012).

The lack of local or at least regional ownership is an issue raised by multiple Portland newsroom employees, who argue that local ownership is better for employees and the public. Though based in Seattle, KGW's original owner, KING Broadcasting, was a family-run company that was said to have a strong relationship with the local Portland community. Company president Dorothy Bullitt (known as 'Ma' to her employees) was respected for her regular presence and for her community-first attitude toward the station

(broadcast technician, 3 February 2012). 'Show me what you've done for the community' typically was her first request during visits to the station (news anchor/reporter, 21 February 2012). This favorable sense of broadly defined 'local' ownership is in stark contrast to the Providence (Rhode Island) Journal Corporation, which took over next and ran the station strictly on a profit basis before selling to current owners, Dallas-based Belo Corporation.

In reducing its costs of operation, the first target of ownership usually involves the downsizing of media professionals. CBS-affiliate KOIN has seen five ownership changes since 2000. None of these owners has been based in Oregon, and most ownership changes have led to many job losses. When Emmis took over in 2001, 30–40 people were sacked, including a number who had been with the station for over 40 years. The survivors were considered 'lucky to be here' (Ignite operator, 14 February 2012). When SJL/Montecito, an investment bankers group, bought the station in 2006, even more staff were let go from what one employee described as an already bare-bones operation.

Similarly, the KPTV/KPDX duopoly eliminated many positions during its two-station consolidation in 2002. In ongoing efforts to cut costs and boost profit margins, the stations more recently laid off the entire commercial production staff, relocated the Meredith Video Services operation to New York City, and hubbed master control operations. The result? Dozens of lost jobs in Portland. Hubbing centralizes programming and commercials in a single location for multiple local stations owned by the same corporation, thereby eliminating positions at each of the stations. In the case of KPTV, West Coast programming is now run from a Meredith facility in Phoenix (personal correspondence, 19 September 2011). Atlanta has a similar hub function for East Coast Meredith stations, concentrating most programming output in two facilities while eliminating jobs at numerous others. A manager familiar with the hub project estimates that labor could be cut from 10 or 12 Master Control operators for each of the company's 14 local stations to about 25 people at 2 centralized hubs, saving the company the cost of paying over 100 employees (engineering manager, 27 January 2012). Some (non-Portland) stations initially attempted to run local newscasts under the same model but subsequently abandoned the idea.

KGW also cut back employee hours after the U.S. economy slid into recession in the late 2000s. The station eliminated five newsroom positions and cut the hours, and sometimes the benefits, of many other employees (Oregon Media Insiders, 2009). This followed a previous round of work schedule reductions that occurred only a few months prior. To offset the lack of staff, the station began airing repeats of the weekday noontime news and the weekend 5 p.m. news and cancelled the weekend 6:30 p.m. news, thus reducing the availability of up-to-date local information at those times.

The axeman cometh

Harry Braverman (1974) discussed the logic of downsizing and deskilling that capitalist enterprises employ through the introduction of new labor displacing automation technology in the workplace in both factory and service industries. One of his main points is that management continually seeks to separate workplace conception from execution, leaving the creative aspects of production to the fewest number of people and turning skilled

workers into replaceable functionaries with less bargaining power. Harking back to the work of industrial engineer F.W. Taylor, technological change has been part of the science of managerial control that permits management to impose a stricter discipline over a reduced workforce and a routinization of their tasks. And while digital technology is not intrinsically bound to centralize managerial control and disempower and deskill workers, examples of worker appropriation of technology are few and far between (Mosco and McKercher, 2008: 4). The more consistent trend is for management to replace living labor with 'dead' (technologically embedded) labor.

Technological advances in news production systems have allowed stations to eliminate most behind-the-scenes personnel by using a system called 'Ignite'. In three of the four Portland news control rooms, Ignite has replaced the jobs of camera operators, audio technicians, graphics generators, video rollers, and technical directors with a computer. Now, one 'operator' programs computer code to instruct a machine to advance, like an assembly line, through various elements of the newscast that used to be done spontaneously, often with a creative touch. Pre-coding thus eliminates the capacity to easily adjust to the more human elements of live television, such as transition timing or audio cues, which are the pride of the broadcast technician.

Of course, with the coming of Ignite many technicians are no longer around to provide such creative elements. KATU, for instance, went from a production staff of over 20 to 10 operators (Oregon Media Insiders, 2009), and KPTV eliminated 12 of 20 production positions, with some of the remaining workers taking pay cuts and/or becoming part-time employees (Antunes, 2010; Ignite operator, 13 February 2012). KGW remains (late 2012) the sole holdout to production automation, although, as mentioned above, their operations staff also has faced stiff cutbacks.

'Ignite is probably the one single largest change I've seen in the industry,' reports a Portland Ignite operator with over 35 years of news production experience. He likened earlier newscasting to captaining a boat: 'Before [Ignite], it was like a speed boat; we could turn that thing on a dime' when it came to changing the anticipated news rundown. 'Everyone on the crew knew what they had to do and did it. Now, it's more like turning a big ship,' with only the Ignite operator able to recode the newscast timeline. Another Portland Ignite operator concurs: 'Coding a newscast is much harder than doing a production' (interview, 14 February 2012). Creativity suffers: it takes more pre-planning to add creative elements without creating mistakes in the pre-programmed timeline.

Who benefits from Ignite? One operator says it is definitely the company: 'Why pay benefits to 24 people when you can buy some equipment, write it off, and only pay 9 people?' (interview, 13 February 2012). While automation may save a station money on personnel expenditures, the newsroom may pay a high price in lost credibility. Eliminating newsroom positions reduces the number of the eyes and ears available to catch potential mistakes, factual and technical, before going to air. A Virginia-based graphic designer noticed so many obvious errors in newscasts across the country, he began to publish them online (Apple, 2011).

Control rooms are not the only news spaces experiencing radical job consolidation. Reporting staffs are now faced with the growing use of what the industry calls the 'one-man band' (sic) – journalists who conduct the interview, shoot, edit, and report the story for air and post it to the web. More than 30% of news directors nationally said they

mostly used 'one-man-bands' to cover the news in 2009 (the most recent year for which data are available), an increase of 9% in three years (Pew Research Center, 2011a). Perhaps more telling is that less than one in five said they do not use solo journalists, a drop of 35% from three years earlier. Almost 43% said the use of one-man-bands altered the way stations were willing to hire (Papper, 2011). The numbers don't suggest that stations are eliminating reporter-photographer teams altogether, but that the vast majority of stations now have the option of using solo journalists to cover at least some of the news of the day (Pew Research Center, 2011b).

A former Portland producer believes these one-man videojournalists (VJs) can actually enhance news coverage if they are used properly, that is, not as a money-saving ploy. Rather, taking advantage of the new technology, more newsroom employees could be trained to hit the streets with cameras and laptop editors, essentially putting twice as many newsgatherers in rotation to cover the market, both on-air and online. 'In my ideal fantasy newsroom, every reporter is out there with a camera and a laptop during the day and they're about to post their story iteratively [online] ... as they're working' (interview, 22 February 2012).

There are, however, practical and safety concerns with a one-man-band. In dangerous or risky situations, having a bigger crew is always an advantage. VJs out by themselves also give up the ability to log, research, or make phone calls while driving back to the station or out to another story (photographers, 17 March 2012; reporters, 19 February 2012 and 26 March 2012). A reporter believes going solo is likely to have a serious impact on story quality. 'You just can't do everything. You simply can't' (interview, 19 February 2012). Studies back this up. Some videojournalists find it difficult to concentrate on their interview subjects while simultaneously trying to gather video. It is harder to ask challenging questions and conduct deeper investigations while framing shots and adjusting lighting (Wallace, 2009).

With technological advances, the need for a live microwave truck may soon be obsolete, replaced by cell phone backpacks. Portland stations are experimenting with these wireless transmitters, which enable a photographer to go live from anywhere with the flip of a switch. The technology reminds one newsroom worker of an old *Saturday Night Live* sketch featuring Al Franken as a reporter donning a satellite dish on his head: 'It's all coming true!' (news anchor/reporter, 21 February 2012). Photographers tend to accept adding live transmission as part of their ever-expanding duties. A situation using a two-person instead of a usual three-person live crew took a story right down to the wire. 'We barely got it on the air with a two-person crew.... I try not to look down the road where they would want a single person to try to attempt that' (photographer, 17 March 2012). If there had been a technical glitch, the story might not have even made it into the broadcast. One person can only be in so many places at once to troubleshoot a problem. For many newsroom personnel, however, such job compression falls under the category of 'all other duties as assigned', with no expectations for added compensation or even the benefit of a manager's acknowledgement of the increased performance requirements.

A broader alienating impact of new technology is the deskilling of newsroom staff. Convergent technologies have changed staffing and reshaped news routines. The internet, for example, has breached many of journalism's former boundaries of time, space, and production. Deadlines are constant. The changes brought by the new media

environment often force journalists to take on extra, often unfamiliar, work. Content does not necessarily transfer easily from one format to another, and many journalists have criticized the lack of web training to help them transition (Tanner and Smith, 2007), especially in high-pressure, bare-bones operations. A Portland anchor states that working with new technology takes up a lot of time, 'because I don't know what I'm doing' since there was no training – and web writing is different than broadcast (interview, 21 February 2012).

'We weren't ready' was a regular refrain among our respondents. Jobs often depend on successfully learning a new piece of gear under less-than-ideal circumstances, often in short, interrupted fragments between newscasts, and while still making deadlines for air. Photographers are sometimes handed new equipment and expected to learn it without formal training, while still getting their stories on the air (interviews, 17 March 2012).

Often, the use of new equipment leads to on-the-air chaos. A reporter called the switchover to Ignite automation 'embarrassing' after one newscast never made it to air, and numerous obvious technical glitches appeared in the newscasts that did air (interview, 26 March 2012). An operator admits: 'We weren't comfortable on the air ... it was awful' (interview, 14 February 2012). An editor confronted with an entirely new video suite jokes about having a mini-breakdown (interview, 18 February 2012).

Station managers point out that budgets are the main factor in who gets trained and how much training they get. When budgets are cut, so is training, leaving some employees to learn by the manual:

It was like taking a tour of the space shuttle and standing on the flight deck and looking around and saying 'This is really cool. Who gets to fly this?' And they say 'You do' and handed me a stack of manuals and said 'by the way, we lift off tomorrow.' (video editing manager, 24 January 2012)

Job skill degradation affects newsroom employees at all levels. An editor with over 30 years in local television believes the skills of both the director and the video editor have been all but eliminated through new hiring, job expectations, and technology. Younger, less experienced, and cheaper workers are brought in to run the computers (interview, 24 January 2012). A former editor-turned-engineer concurs: while the duties and job responsibilities have remained the same, the level of experience has 'gone downhill' over the years, as huge demand outweighs the skill level available (interview, 14 January 2012). One used to start at the bottom rung of the skill ladder and work up as experience accumulated; now, more often than not, there is no ladder. Cheaper and faster are the principal interests of management.

News photographers also see their craft taking a backseat to getting more product on the air:

They gotta have it faster, so you have to do it faster ... you end up shooting faster, you end up editing faster. And [with] some stories, you might get by with that. But for a lot of us who have been in the business for a long time, there was pride of ownership in your product. And you tried to put out the best product you could with as much effort and skill as you could get into it in the timeframe allowed. Now, there doesn't seem to be any interest on management's part for

that product to have any real skill level to it.... They just want it on when they want it on, and who cares what it looks like. (photographer, 17 March 2012)

Perhaps the biggest attrition in the industry has occurred with studio camera operators being replaced by robotics. Where not long ago, there was a physical body behind each camera, now one person is responsible for 8 or 9 cameras. As with many other newsroom job descriptions, the pay differential for this added level of productivity has been minimal if anything at all (broadcast technician, 25 January 2012). What is happening in the television industry is similar to what happened to automobile manufacturing with the introduction of advanced robotics – greater value added productivity by workers with a radically reduced share of the output gains.

Another cost- and labor-saving option for local newsrooms is the use of video news releases (VNRs). The VNR, ‘which can look like regular news stories to the unaided eye’, is produced by advertising, PR, and marketing firms, private corporations, industry associations, or government agencies. The audience often does not realize they are actually watching a prepackaged infomercial (SourceWatch, 2010). Local stations sometimes even add local elements to the VNR. The president and CEO of Medialink, Larry Moscowitz, commented: ‘If there is news in your brands, we’ll find a way to put your brands in your news. In a sense, it’s product placement, but it’s earned a place on the shelf.’ Medialink in 2005 had about 1000 clients, including General Motors and Chrysler (Friedman, 2005). Putting this kind of ‘news’ on the air allows stations to reduce the newsroom workforce by filling time with non-station-produced content.

Portland stations have taken advantage of such content. A December 2005 news program on KOIN-TV featured a story on how Portland was successfully cleaning up the polluted Willamette River. The piece was introduced by a news anchor and narrated by Walter Cronkite, and viewers were not told that it was actually produced by the city’s Bureau of Environmental Services. Environmental Protection Agency criticisms of the river clean-up project were never mentioned. KOIN added its logo to the video during repackaging. In this case, a government agency used the station as a vehicle for propaganda (Jackson, 2006), but health and consumer industries and local civic organizations also produce such videos for newscasts. KPTV-TV was cited by the FCC for passing off a sleep aid commercial, produced by Nelson’s Rescue Sleep, as a news story (Teinowitz, 2007).

News stations have also developed an alternate source of newsroom labor in recent years: the audience itself. Audience members are encouraged to contribute video, pictures, and news tips for air, essentially providing unpaid labor for news organizations, an *informal* labor force as it were. Audiences act as part of a supply chain subsidizing the stations with their smart phones, email, Twitter, video, Facebook, community websites, and other means of supplying information. While this opens the potential for dialog between the press and the public, it also blurs the line defining who is a journalist (Pavlik, 2000). What used to be produced in-house is now increasingly crowdsourced. Expectations are that citizens will send in their video of breaking news. As one former producer put it, if the neighbor’s house is on fire, ‘after you get the cats out, take out your iphone and shoot some video for us’ (interview, 22 February 2012). Journalists used to be gatekeepers of the news, but now anyone can ‘publish’ or ‘broadcast’ their information (Singer, 2011).

With the technology-facilitated reorganization of the newsroom, TV journalists over the past decade increasingly have been subject to reduction in status through ‘casualization, free-lancing and other non-permanent contractual arrangements, flexibility and insecurity’ (Örnebring, 2010: 59). They’ve also suffered from a speeding-up and intensification of news production that pressures them to constantly work on ‘breaking stories’ and to adapt their work for different media platforms: broadcast, print, and web.⁴ There is little or no time permitted to investigate stories in depth or add creativity to storytelling.⁵ Using computers and smart phones now permits quick ways of doing research but also takes journalists away from live sources. Often, what passes for investigative reporting involves nothing more than making a few phone calls (assignment editor, 1 February 2012), or taking ‘more than an hour’ to investigate something (reporter, 19 February 2012). While investigative reporting used to allow for multiple days for research on a subject, now many ‘investigative’ reporters double as general assignment reporters and are often expected to produce at least one story daily.⁶ Journalistic values thus tend to fall by the wayside in the rush to fill news time, arguably at the expense of the community that relies on the newsroom for information and understanding about what’s going on locally.

What difference do unions make?

Portland television workers are represented by four different major unions: the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), and the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET). Three of the four news-producing stations employ members of at least one these unions. However, only IBEW, representing technical and engineering workers, has representation based in Portland. The ‘local’ chapters of IATSE (representing photographers and editors) and NABET (representing technical and engineering workers) are California-based, and AFTRA’s ‘local’ representative (for on-air employees) is in Seattle.

Even among local newsroom employees who have seen layoffs and job consolidation, some feel union membership is not necessarily beneficial. One former IBEW member asserts that the union doesn’t know the business, and that he can negotiate his own salary more successfully (interview, 13 February 2012). While this may be true of some workers, national data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that in service work overall, union workers earn nearly double the wages of non-union employees (Foster, 2003). Nonetheless, an IBEW representative concedes that broadcast workers, who represent only an estimated 2–3% of their membership, are not given the union’s highest priority, especially compared to its much larger membership in the construction industry. Union broadcasting representatives often learn about the broadcast business on the job (interview, 20 March 2012).

Others say union membership unnecessarily limits job descriptions and keeps people from learning new skills (interviews 25 January 2012 and 22 February 2012). One employee argues: ‘If you’re in the business of producing television, and your bread and butter is editing clips, then everyone ought to be doing that,’ instead of limiting that task to employees with a certain job title (news director/former producer, 22 February 2012).

Another asserts that unions limit the skills an employee can learn – for fear of crossing designated union job descriptions (interview, 25 January 2012).

Other newsroom workers, however, find great benefits to membership. At one station, the union ‘leveled the playing field’ in terms of overtime, guaranteed wage increases, and job security, after years of no salary adjustments (interview, 14 February 2012). Even an anchor who is an AFTRA member but works under a personal services contract argues that the union protects her coworkers by setting standards of pay and working conditions, which, in turn, makes life better for everyone (interview, 21 February 2012). ‘The union creates the minimum base that raises everybody up,’ including those who may be non-union members (union representative, 20 March 2012).

Photographers, even those who complain about the difficulty of getting in touch with their ‘local’ representative in California, acknowledge that they would still rather work under the union than to decertify. ‘Even with all the problems, at least there is a framework under which both parties agree to try and work.... I’d rather at least have that than [station management] deciding to do whatever they want, whenever they wanted, however they wanted’ (interviews, 17 March 2012). As a former IBEW negotiator for KGW and KATU points out, even with local union representation, collective bargaining negotiations are never really local. ‘It’s not people talking about people any more’ – instead, it’s corporate-hired attorneys, with no connection to the workers, who are brought in to call the shots (interview, 20 March 2012).

The limited power of unions to protect newsroom workers from the onslaught of job compression and job elimination in part is a result of past failures to block or slow down these developments. With relatively few workers in the contemporary TV newsroom, as in Portland, a union such as IBEW will devote its limited resources to its larger and, during better economic times, growing labor sector, namely workers in the construction industry. It is difficult for the conditions of media workers to receive public attention, when there is a well-documented avoidance on the part of TV news to cover worker and union issues. When economic downturns are discussed in the news, union representatives are almost never consulted, whereas business leaders have an overwhelming preponderance in offering interpretations (Parenti, 1996; Puette, 1992; Tracy, 2011).

As one author has noted, this stems from ‘the largely unacknowledged fact that journalistic outlets are commonly represented as distinct from business institutions when in reality they coalesce as integral components of corporate America’. As he concludes, ‘this is the result of the decreased strength of the labor movement, the dwindling resources for reportorial journalism, and the ascendance of market ideology and information serving the interests of investors’ (Tracy, 2011: 271, 280).

Conclusions: newsrooms in the public interest

The local TV news business has followed the same trend as other technology-intensive private industries. Increased productivity has come at the expense of workers. The pressure to fill up news holes takes precedence over the *public service* function of local TV news (i.e. programming that is dedicated to cultural and educational enrichment, not necessarily to garner high ratings or service commercial interests). As one technician expressed it: ‘It’s a business. It has nothing to do with news any more. If your station is

owned by a corporation or a private entity, [it's about] answering to Wall Street ... answering to stock brokers ... it's all about economics' (broadcast engineer, 14 January 2012).

More news does not mean more democracy or a better informed public. Indeed, the inverse appears closer to reality. If, as is commonly assumed, the quality of a democratic society is only as good as the information that citizens have to make informed decisions about public policy and representative government, the low public estimation of that news suggests that democracy is not working. Even on the conservatively biased Freedom House 2012 rankings of countries with the freest press, the United States came in only 24th, behind almost all of Western Europe as well as much poorer countries, including Estonia, Jamaica, Palau, Portugal, and the Marshall Islands (Freedom House, 2012: 13). According to a poll by *Time* magazine, the most trusted news source in America is not even a journalist; it is comedian Jon Stewart (Sussman, 2010: 104). With fewer people generating the news, the quality of news reporting is diminished (broadcast engineer, 14 January 2012). Moreover, in local media throughout the country, there is very little news of substance about cities. Urbanist Peter Dreier observed that 'images from the nightly news, newswEEKlies, and daily newspapers are an unrelenting story of social pathology' with 'very little news coverage of collective efforts by unions, community organizations, and other grassroots groups to address problems'. Only when such efforts include drama, conflict, and/or violence do the major media typically pay attention. In Los Angeles, for example, murder, which actually represented less than 1% of crime in the late 1990s, was the focus of 20% of local news crime reports (Dreier, 2005: 193–4).

What we found through research, personal experience in the newsroom, and interviews with other members of the TV news industry in Portland (and elsewhere) is that there is a close connection between the economics and the new technologies of news production on the one hand and the reduction of news staff, the declining quality of news, and deteriorating public trust in the TV news function. More local TV news is being produced with fewer workers and declining real income among them. In short, with newsroom workers taking on more tasks at the same or lower pay levels than in the past, the rate of exploitation (more productivity for less pay) is increasing. The rise in news output is less a concern of the news business for disseminating useful information and more a determination by its station owners and managers that news can generate advertising dollars contributing to stations' profitability.

The decline of broadcast journalism mirrors the setbacks in print journalism in the United States. In a version of Parkinson's law, local TV news stations see the medium as a space for fitting in as much advertising as the audience will bear. Station managers are not willing to invest in time-consuming, well-investigated stories. Rather, the emphasis is on lurid crime and fires, which draw dramatic interest and have visual appeal, and on local weather coverage. At the same time that news staffs are being cut, local stations are increasingly sharing the same news programming at formerly competing stations, leading to fewer journalists and crews covering the news. At least 83 of the 210 TV markets in the United States are involved in some form of 'shared [news] services agreement', thereby reducing the number and potential diversity of editorial voices and outlets for news in a given community (Stelter, 2012).

Americans continue to turn to local television for news more than any other source, even though the steep decline in investigative reporting and decreased overall independence of news workers make television more of an educational wasteland for information about the community and the region. As we see it, the interests of independent journalists and other television workers are bound up with the interests of local communities, which the FCC has been reluctant to protect. And whereas other areas of urban life, such as air and water quality, land use, commercial and residential zoning, and food safety are relatively well regulated, broadcast media are largely free of government-imposed public service and educational obligations.⁷ The status of professional journalism has already become the most immediate casualty of consolidation at the pay-to-play news station. But the most appalling consequences of consolidation have been for the community that continues to lose its voice in the representation of public interests and as informed stakeholders in society.

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Notes

1. Much of this was the result of 'a 77% increase in auto advertising and a record \$2.2 billion in political advertising for the midterm elections' (Pew Research Center, 2011a).
2. According to one study of the corporate media, during the nine months of the bill's introduction and passage, the three major television networks devoted a total of 19.5 minutes of coverage of this momentous change in telecommunications law, which effectively overturned more than 60 years of public policy in this sector. See Croteau and Hoynes (2006: 184).
3. The names of interviewees have been withheld to protect respondents from possible retaliation by their employers.
4. To produce more content, corporate owners have taken to combining formerly competing media resources into news partnerships, forcing newsroom workers to work for not just one media entity, but several (Duhe et al., 2004).
5. As newsroom employees are asked to provide more content across more platforms with fewer available resources, many wonder whether the quality of information provided to the various audiences is being compromised (Smith et al., 2007). In a survey, only 43% of newsroom workers believed convergence benefits the general public, while 70% believed media companies were the main beneficiaries (Huang et al., 2006).
6. One telling statistic about the decline of investigative reporting is the 30% decline in membership among newspaper and broadcast journalists in the organization Investigative Reporters and Editors between 2003 and 2009 (Walton, 2010). A survey of local TV news directors revealed that less than 20% believed their stations did a good job of investigative reporting (Wenger, 2012).
7. It is at the discretion of the FCC to determine whether commercially licensed U.S. television stations meet the expectation to air 'some' public interest programming serving community needs (Bishop and Hakanen, 2002).

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Interviews

Names withheld to protect respondents from possible retaliation by their employers.

Assignment editor, 1 February 2012.

Broadcast engineer, 14 January 2012.

Broadcast technician #1, 25 January 2012.

Broadcast technician #2, 3 February 2012.

Commercial video production specialist, 18 February 2012.

Engineer/manager, 27 January 2012.

IBEW representative, 20 March 2012.

Ignite operator #1, 13 February 2012.

Ignite operator #2, 14 February 2012.

News anchor/reporter, 21 February 2012.

News director/former producer, 22 February 2012.

Photographer #1, 17 March 2012.

Photographer #2, 17 March 2012.

Reporter #1, 19 February 2012.

Reporter #2, 26 March 2012.

Video editing manager, 24 January 2012.