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The Rising Trend of Sensationalized, Tabloid Television News Within the Traditional Evening News Format

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THE RISING TREND OF SENSATIONALIZED, TABLOID TELEVISION NEWS WITHIN THE TRADITIONAL EVENING NEWS FORMAT

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Research shows that television is regarded by the public as its main source of information about politics, and current events and also entertainment. While most studies show that television has the ability to adequately inform people about entertaining events and personalities, more and more viewers of television news are becoming less knowledgeable about legitimate issues which have a great impact on society. In essence, people who claim that television is their main source of news, know less about a greater number of topics.

Numerous studies, as illustrated in this thesis, also show that the tactics used in syndicated "sleaze" journalism to entice viewers to watch their programs, are currently finding their way into the traditional national and local evening news formats. Topics presenting sex, scandal, gossip and graphic video footage are more likely to lead a newscast, than subjects which directly affect a large portion of the viewing audience. This has media critics worried, because while research shows that television has an awesome power to persuade, it is still a relatively new medium. The impact of the television medium's bottom line dollar versus the

FCC's stance of operating in the public interests has yet to be determined.

This thesis deals with the rising trend of sensationalized tabloid television news within the traditional evening news format. The research presented in this paper will dispel the myth that television news programs are a credible source of information.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

A MEDIA CRITIC COMMENTS...

> There was, of course, the usual inflamed rhetoric: 'shocking evidence,' 'deadly gamble,' and 'tomorrow night we take you inside the minds of people whose passion is dangerous!!!!!!' There also were the by-now routine use of slow-motion effects, the people with hidden identities, some throbbing music, rapid-cut editing and a couple of brief clips from a porno movie. (Mink 5D)

St. Louis Post-Dispatch Media Critic, Eric Mink, wrote about a three-part series on sexually transmitted diseases which aired early in 1992 on KMOV television news. This statement supports the perception that viewers of local television news stations are currently being subjected to reports which center more on entertainment than information.

Series which aired in 1992 on St. Louis' three main television news stations, KTVI, KMOV and KSDK included sexually active priests, voodoo, local sin centers, how to steal cars, the details of notorious sex crimes, nightmares in baby sitting, ordinary women who supplement their incomes through prostitution and born again virgins. These topics are astoundingly similar to those found on nationally syndicated tabloid television shows such as *Hard Copy, A Current Affair, Inside Edition* and a host of others. *A Current Affair* Publicist Jeff Erdel calls his show "infotainment," admitting that the show is produced to entertain viewers (Erdel), whereas the local news stations are claiming to be superior to the tabloid shows by presenting accurate, up-to-the-minute news which affects the majority of St. Louisans.

While the "credible" news stations claim to provide the community with journalistic excellence, research shows that most of the newscasts supply viewers with topics that have all of the components of a best selling fiction novel: sex, violence, scandal, crime, gossip, deceit and conflict.

This thesis investigates the rising trend of sensationalized, tabloid television news within the traditional national and local evening news formats. News stations regularly fabricate hype because, in

most instances, media executives say it's needed in order to keep the viewer from straying from the newscast. Sensationalized news has been used as a promotion tool since the early days of print, and now that same tool is being employed by television executives in order to entice viewers to watch a newscast.

Television is an industry which thrives on creativity and entertainment. Yet current polls indicate that close to 70% of all Americans say their dependence on the accuracy and credibility of television journalism is steadily increasing. While this dependency grows, networks are reinventing their evening newscasts, delivering hype, sensationalism and stories thrown together with few facts (Nimmo 25). Former KSDK Reporter Karen Koman says, "Today it's a station where budgets and the bottom line take precedence over that thing called news" (Koman 46). This is very frightening, considering that the aforementioned poll also indicates that those who claim television is their main source of news have emerged as less well informed than viewers who also seek information from a variety of media sources, including newspapers, magazines and radio, and then draw their own conclusions based on their findings (Nimmo 25-27).

The following chapters of this thesis will:

(1) Introduce the subject and provide a historical perspective on tabloid news including a brief review of print "sensationalism". It will also discuss what sensationalistic techniques, appeals, and promotions stations in the St. Louis market are currently doing to entice viewers to watch their newscasts.

(2) Introduce major writers and thinkers in local and national broadcast journalism, and report their views on whether or not media managers are operating in the public interest.

(3) Narrow the subject from the generalized topic of the mass communication industry, and concentrate on the responsibility of television news to the public. Personal interviews from professionals in the St. Louis market will be included.

(4) Present the results of studies which directly relate to television journalism's impact on society. Present audience estimates for the syndicated tabloid shows which air in St. Louis.

(5) Analyze the results and discuss the rationale behind conclusions drawn in this thesis.

(1) HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: BACKING INTO TABLOID TELEVISION NEWS

Television came onto the scene as a mass media in the late 1940's and early 1950's and is in every essence a "new" phenomenon, but news, including "sensationalized news" certainly is not. Historically, the media have always attempted to draw a mass audience through shocking or stretched efforts. It is undisputed that people have a basic interest in human behavior. Even going back as far as the 1830's and 1840's in England, the penny press realized that stories dealing with sex, crime and scandal sold far better than those dealing with government and finance (Pickett 177).

Tabloid television news can be seen as a manifestation of an old journalistic approach. Sensationalism for the purpose of profit.

From the very start, newspaper editors, like their modern television newsroom counterparts, have been determined to outsell one another. Joseph Pulitzer purchased a bankrupt *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in 1878, and succeeded in turning his paper into a powerhouse by appealing to readers with sensationalism. Headlines in the paper, like those now seen on nightly television broadcasts, were hyped

to emphasize sex, violence, scandal, crime, gossip, and disasters (Gamble 63). One headline, printed in the paper's early years, described a murderer at the moment of execution:

> WARD MCCONEY HANGED: Shouting From Under The Black Cap That His Executioners are Murderers. (64)

Eager to increase readership, Pulitzer even had erotic descriptions included in drama reviews. Critics of Pulitzer's news style complained of the negative impact that his news had on the well-being of the public, while on the other hand, Pulitzer's newspaper was also praised for its crusade for the rights of the poor as well as its attack on gambling and police corruption (66).

Still, circulation was always uppermost in Pulitzer's mind. Pulitzer was considered masterful in the way he used stunts and contests to boost readership. His most famous involved sending reporter Nellie Bly, whose real name was Elizabeth Cochrane, around the world and holding a contest to see who could guess how long it would take her to complete her trip (Pickett 180). Nearly one million estimates were received. Throughout her adventurous trip, Bly continued to update stories appearing in the *New York*

World (Gamble 64). Incidentally, Bly made the trip from San Francisco to New York in 72 days, 6 hours, 10 minutes and some seconds (Pickett 182).

Still, legend has it that the rivalry between Pulitzer and a second newspaper magnate during the turn of the century, William Randolph Hearst, was instrumental in creating societal problems. Some claim that the rivalry sparked the Spanish-American War because of the media hype. An illustrator for Hearst, Frederic Remington, was assigned by him to gather information on the war. Remington sent the following telegram to Hearst:

HEARST, JOURNAL, NEW YORK

EVERYTHING IS QUIET. THERE IS NO

TROUBLE HERE.

THERE WILL BE NO WAR. WISH TO RETURN.

Hearst is reported to have replied:

PLEASE REMAIN. YOU FURNISH THE

PICTURES

AND I'LL FURNISH THE WAR. HEARST. (Gamble 66)

In another incident involving Hearst and the Spanish-American War, a reporter from the *New York Journal*, James Creelman, led an attack on a fort at El

Caney. The fort was taken, and Creelman seized the Spanish flag as a trophy for his paper. However, Creelman was struck by a bullet which smashed his arm and tore a hole in his back. He later wrote the following:

> Someone knelt in the grass beside me and put his hand on my fevered head. Opening my eyes, I saw Mr. Hearst, the proprietor of the *New York Journal*, a straw hat with a bright ribbon on his head, a revolver at his belt, and a pencil and notebook in his hand. The man who had provoked the war had come to see the result with his own eyes, and, finding one of his correspondents prostrate, was doing the work himself. Slowly he took down my story of the fight. Again and again the tinging of the Mauser bullets interrupted, but he seemed unmoved. The battle had to be reported somehow. "I'm sorry you're hurt, but" - and his face was radiant with enthusiasm - "wasn't it a splendid fight? We must beat every paper in the world!" (66)

The stories printed by Hearst during the Spanish-American War boosted circulation of the *New York Journal* over the one million mark for several months. Hearst is not fondly remembered by many who study the

historic impact of journalism, "...his journalistic impact after 1904 was negligible," writes Robert Rutland in his book *Newsmongers* (65).

The history of the antics used in the creation of exaggerated news is relevant to the discussion of tabloid television news if only to point out that it (A) is not a new element in journalism, (B) it has been successful in boosting media sales and gaining audience members. The examples of Pulitzer and Hearst may seem a little farfetched and off the topic; however, there are striking similarities found between events which happened at the turn of the century in the print industry, and some of the examples of journalistic practices found recently in St. Louis television news.

With the remote tuner enabling viewers to zap commercials and programming, the local news stations are using the same gimmicks as Pulitzer and Hearst to boost their ratings share. The news shows are feeling the pressure from the vast amount of competition which includes the VCR, thirty or more channels offered by cable, and even Nintendo.

It is well known in the media industry that programs running before the news are generally apt to influence viewing choices. In June 1992, the Nielsen Ratings showed that *Hard Copy*, which runs before the 5

o'clock afternoon newscast on KTVI, was ranked number one with men age 18 to 54 and number two with women age 18 to 54 (this age group is generally the most desired by advertisers). *A Current Affair* begins at 4 o'clock just ahead of *Hard Copy* to round out the hour preceding the news. Two syndicated "infotainment" programs which thrive on shocking evidence, throbbing music, sleazy and sometimes emotional content are being placed just before KTVI's "2 News Team." According to the Nielsen Company, ratings for the 5 o'clock newscasts were up 46 percent from a year ago (Mink 5D).

In the summer of 1992, KMOV Television news used a technique similar to Pulitzer and Nellie Bly, to draw viewers to its 5 o'clock afternoon weekday newscasts. The station required people to watch the 5 o'clock news in order to win a tune-in contest set up during *The Golden Girls* program which aired 4:30, just before the news. (KMOV bills itself, "Your 24-Hour News Source.") Nielsen recorded the results for that ploy. *The Golden Girls* edged out *Hard Copy* and won the number one spot for that period of female viewers ages 18 to 54. *Hard Copy* held the number one position for males ages 18-45 (5D).

Many stations across the United States have taken the same approach in marketing their early evening

newscast by placing a syndicated tabloid news show, just before its station's local newscast. An Arbitron Television Syndicated Programs Analysis book reported in 1989 that *A Current Affair* aired in 34 markets across the nation, between the weekday hours of 4 and 6 in the afternoon, and in another 19 markets between the hours of 6 and 7. In other words, Arbitron estimates that nearly 1,601,000 households viewed *A Current Affair* between 4 and 7 in the afternoon (Arbitron, July 1989, Vol I 947).

A different tabloid show, *Inside Edition*, aired in a total of 33 markets during that same period. Arbitron estimates that in 1989 nearly 1,276,000 households nationwide watched this show between 4 and 7 (Arbitron, July 1989, Vol. II 2165). KSDK airs *Inside Edition* at 4 o'clock. Some additional ratings information will be detailed in Chapter 4.

Most of the journalism found on our independent network affiliate and national network news stations is not information journalism which provides the viewer with various facts and truth that can be applied to situations or problems that the viewer may face on a day-to-day basis, but instead story journalism created to give the viewers accounts of events they find emotionally exciting and aesthetically pleasing (Nimmo 27). Many such stories

appeared on St. Louis television news in 1992, including the battle of the homeless anchors. KMOV's anchor Larry Connors and KSDK's anchor Deanne Lane took to the streets camouflaged as homeless people during the same week to provide viewers with insight to the city's homeless problem (Mink 1A, 10A). No doubt, homelessness is a problem in the city. However, the fact that two competing stations had main anchors pose as homeless people created more of a story than the story itself.

Tabloid journalism is a technique which has been widely used by members of the media since the early years of mass communication. However, at a time when the public is increasingly dependent on television as a news source, news directors nationwide, are using sensationalized stories and promotional gimmicks to draw viewers. Yet, few realize that what they are watching is based slightly on reality and largely on publicity and emotional shock. "The hidden ideology of broadcasters is to sell you things, not to provide information..." says Herb Chao Gunther, Executive Director of the Public Media Center, a non-profit advertising agency in San Francisco (Iwata 21).

It is necessary to note that the term "bias" will be frequently used throughout this culminating

project. In the context of this discussion the term is not ideological in nature but rather one that inclines toward the sensationalistic aspect of a news story.

CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It was discovered in the vast amount of research which went into this thesis that there are two prevalent schools of thought surrounding the television news industry. First, the media exists to serve the public, and therefore should strive to provide relevant and credible factual data which would, in-turn, provoke the viewing public to take action and improve current culture. Second, critics, as well as those who work within the field, have all too often agreed that the media exists only as a private business, established to provide profit to the media owners. The most effective way to maintain that profit is through entertainment or, as it has been commonly been coined in the broadcast industry, "infotainment.".

Bliss (1991) claims that there are clashes between public interest and corporate interest, and between news programming and profits. "If it bleeds...it leads," writes Bliss of the current news ethic. Bliss claims that in the early days of television, station owners provided news as a public

service in order to maintain the station's broadcast license. Consequently, it was a result of this service to the public that it was soon discovered that money could be made from news (Bliss 459).

Because of the large profit potential, competition has become intense in the television news business. Critic John Leonard claims that news is no longer, in fact, news. Leonard writes that in televised newscasts, not enough time is placed on newsworthy events which affect a large portion of the population, but instead on the "...inordinate amount of yukking it up between anchor, sports reporter, and whoever is doing the weather." This "happy talk" format, according to Leonard, "giggles its way to apocalypse" (459). Agreeing with the comments made by Leonard, Bliss indicates that instead of plainly presenting the news, programs now appear to be competing in wishing the viewers well. "Viewers are urged to have a good day, have a good night, have a good weekend, have a good week. What has this to do with news?" (460)

Bliss writes that the establishment of the happy talk format, to a large extent, is a result of market researchers, not editors. Those researchers also have the power to persuade those who determine the content of local newscasts. Researchers have found that

because television is in every aspect a visual medium, the picture is, in many instances, more important than the story. It has been demonstrated by news stations across the country, and even in the St. Louis market, that broadcast stations lean toward the theory, the more graphic the scene, the better (460).

Bliss discovered in an interview with John Hart, formally of CBS, and also a former anchor for "World Monitor" that was a program produced by the *Christian Science Monitor*, that "too many producers are provoked by media managers to select stories because of their ability to seize an audience, instead of offering coverage designed to serve the audience" (460).

The key theme offered by Bliss through his research for the book *Now The News: The Story of Broadcast Journalism*, is that the competition challenging the network and local news stations is intense. Niche marketing has provided viewers with the choice of channels such as CNN, CNN Headline News, C-Span, Turner Network Television, The Weather Channel, USA Network, Showtime, HBO, and a host of others. Nibbling away at the mass networks' share are more than 9300 cable systems serving 53 million subscribers, which translates into roughly more than 100 million viewers. Bliss concludes that in order to captivate viewers, mass audience programmers, such as

those programming network news and local news, are utilizing sensationalism to maintain viewers and profit. Media managers, according to Bliss, believe that this is an effective defense against niche marketers (468).

Like many researchers, Robinson and Levy (1990) state that the powerful medium of television is not being utilized to its fullest potential. The authors found through their research that in the 1950's, television was looked upon as a new medium which represented an innovative way to provide information to a vast audience who needed this information to guide their actions. They note that journalists realized that the dynamic and dominant medium of television offered the opportunity to interest uninformed persons in politics and other social events, as well as to motivate those people to become involved in societal issues (Robinson and Levy 30).

Robinson and Levy support the theory that in the past, television has proven its enormous power of persuasion through the transmission of dramatic news events such as civil rights protests, wars and various conflicts which did provoke viewers to react. However, as powerful a medium as television has been, both criticize its evolving use. Their studies find that as audience numbers steadily rise, and more

Americans than ever before now report their dependence on televised news, media managers have lessened their commitment to inform (30):

> TV news is described as a mere headline service that provides shallow, overdramatized depictions of a narrow range of public events. In its efforts to attract the attention of viewers, TV news has neglected to provide background information that would help viewers make sense of the colorful but ambiguous images that often characterize news coverage. (31)

Robinson and Levy point out that a quick jumble of pictures and words leads to misunderstandings and poorly informed viewers (209). The authors strongly convey in the *The Main Source*, that although televised news has a strong ability to communicate information to a voluminous amount of people, much more needs to be investigated by the media industry, as well as the viewing public, concerning the quality and quantity of the information distributed to the masses (31).

Neuman (1991), in agreement with all of the aforementioned authors, communicates that the television medium does not act in the public interest as it was once designed to do, according to 1934

Communication Act established by the Federal Communication Commission. According to Neuman, the TV medium, as it exists today, is run by business entreprenuers who are trained to seek, "the bucket of gold at the end of the capitalist rainbow." The author points out that although there are only a limited number of broadcast slots within a given spectrum, each media entity still must exist profitably with a half a dozen or more television stations, three dozen radio stations as well as cable, satellite, and VCRs (Neuman 135).

Neuman's research found that television profits run at a rate of 20%, compared to the average American manufacturing plant which runs at 8% (136), proving his theory that although the ideal would be for media to provide equal voice as well as equal vote, the economic ideal calls for unequal rewards for motivated hard work and profit-making innovation for the privately owned mass media (137).

Schoenbrun (1989), who worked as a reporter since the inception of broadcast television news, writes about his many experiences at CBS. His concern for the current direction of broadcast news is very apparent as he criticized media managers for lessening the importance of credible newspeople and reporting. Schoenbrun is uncertain about what the future holds

for audiences of the next generation of the TV news era. His journalistic background moves him to believe that corporate structure in the media may, in time, severely impair that future audience.

> Today more than 55 percent of Americans get all or most of their news from television, which may well explain the present phenomenon of a nation that knows less about more things. (Schoenbrun 162)

Schoenbrun notes that TV's fall from grace has been occasioned by a drop in standards, and an increasing emphasis on what is exciting rather than on what is significant,

> ...a virtual elimination of news analysis, and a dearth of thoughtful, in-depth documentaries that, alone, have the space to deal intelligently and thoroughly with the many complex issues of national and world affairs. (162)

Schoenbrun believes the trend toward that silly, fast-paced, interest peaking stories used to maintain an audience may not be, in fact, what all viewers want. Schoenbrun describes many experiences in the broadcast news industry which validate this point. He

notes that some within the industry still believe in television's ability to present credible stories reported to inform viewers. Among them are his former CBS colleague and producer, Fred Friendly.

> No one believed more passionately in TV's educational obligations, and the ability to be interesting as well as informative. (163)

Schoenbrun says that Friendly had proved in "See It Now" and "CBS Reports" that:

> It was possible to win a big audience and make money, while digging deeply into a significant topic of national and world affairs. (163)

While providing an insight to the history of broadcast television news from its inception, Schoenbrun provides strong personal arguments which support his professional opinion that the television medium has lost sight of its main purpose, which he claims is to inform.

Lemert (1989) argued that the television medium has difficulty dealing with issues with which they are not directly involved, which interpreted means that stories can have a sense of "whimsy" because the reporters cannot always relate to the seriousness of

the stories. Lemert says that time and time again reporters don't learn from their mistakes, and instead repeat the same mistakes over and over again, which, in his opinion, has lead to the decline of accurate reporting (Lemert 75). His book details the importance of learning how to critically analyze the television medium.

Hanson (1991) compiled information about the effects the media has on the public. Hanson's book is a compilation of opinions on many ethical issues facing the broadcasting industry by a variety of media and social experts.

Critic and author Michael Novak argues that television shapes our perceptions of reality, and expands the topic to include all of TV's programming and the effect that the medium has on society. Novak writes that television builds the structure of social expectations "in much the same way that school lessons slowly, over the years, tutor the uninformed mind and teach it 'how to think'" (4). Novak agrees that media executives, writers, producers and sponsors tend to project their own fantasies on the general public, in turn creating social myths (9).

Hanson's book also devotes attention to the subject of the 1934 Communications Act, established by the Federal Communications Commission, which seeks

that broadcast stations operate in the public interest. The central question asked in this segment of the book centers on whether providing news programs consisting of sensationalism fulfills that requirement (235). Ratings professional Hugh Malcolm Belvill says that ratings do distort news judgment and lead to the scheduling of lurid and sensational news stories, especially during sweeps week (ratings period). Belvill says:

> This is when series on abortion, teen pregnancy, incest, rape, child abuse, and so on are unveiled. The accusations are not baseless, but the dimensions of the practice and the extent of its influence on ratings are overblown. (237)

Yet, the majority of media experts holds that ratings are what everything is based on, from advertising dollars to determining the viewing audience's preferences. However, according to author Todd Gitlin, the ratings industry is seriously flawed. Gitlin writes that the ratings company, Neilsen in this instance, selects its initial sample randomly according to accepted statistical practice. Yet, the problem is that not everyone chosen for the sample will agree to install the Neilsen Audimeter device.

"Congressional hearings in 1963 brought out the fact that fewer than half of the designated Nielsen sample cooperated" (243).

The central point to Hanson's book is that society must continue to question the past results of our media, while exploring new practices and technologies. There is no one answer to the ethical dilemmas faced daily by programmers. Consequently, all issues should be evaluated by their current placement in history.

Boorstin (1964) broadened the topic to include television programming as a whole, and its relevance and placement in society. He pointed out that as an audience, we demand more than the world can give us. Boorstin conveys that if the world offers no real news, then it is up to a good reporter to fabricate or glorify a story by the questions he/she asks politicians (Boorstin 8-12).

> If there is no news visible to the naked eye, or to the average citizen, we still expect it to be there for the enterprising newsman. The successful reporter is one who can find a story, even if there is no assassination or civil war. (8)

Boorstin says that the creation of news is a result of our society's demand for illusions, and escape from reality. Boorstin says that society expects that life can be enlivened through those who inform us by providing "happenings" that make up for the lack of spontaneous events. The author relates that in many instances, news directors take on the role of God, making news happen, creating events that somehow are not real. These "pseudo-events," as Boorstin calls them, tend to be self-fulfilling prophecies, designed to make up for what our world lacks (8-12).

Boorstin cites an example occurring in 1960, during the school integration disorders in New Orleans. The city's mayor argued that the televised reports were exaggerated and damaging the city's reputation.

> People were given an impression of prevailing violence, when only one-tenth of one percent of the population had been involved in the demonstration. At least two television reporters had gone about the crowd interviewing demonstrators with inflammatory questions like 'Why are you opposed to intermarriage?' The mayor said

> he himself had witnessed a television cameraman 'setting up a scene,' and then having persuaded a group of students to respond like a cheering section, had them yell and demonstrate on cue. (29)

Boorstin says the reporters cited "freedom of the press," as an excuse for their actions.

> That was once an institution preserved in the interest of the community. Now it is often a euphemism for the prerogative of reporter to produce their synthetic commodity. (29)

Without weighing the consequences of lying to ourselves through these pseudo-events, Boorstin believes that we may ultimately be defeating ourselves (241).

Boorstin's book, *The Image*, has had several revised and updated editions since its original printing 1961. This book was listed in nearly every media/journalism bibliography through current 1992 books. *The Image* deals with not only the news industry, but the broadcast television industry as a whole. Its message is still valid, and stands unshaken among media experts today.

Tartikoff (1992), like Boorstin, analyzes not just the news industry, but instead the larger picture of the entertainment industry. Tartikoff, former President of NBC, and more recently, Chairman of Paramount, discusses his role in programming a major network. The title of his book, *The Last Great Ride*, symbolizes the end of the mass audience networks. Tartikoff points out that with the vast amount of competition for viewers, the three major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC), will increasingly find it harder to compete in a market where viewers literally have the power to "zap" through thirty or more channels, each programmed to appeal to a specific market segment. In essence, Tartikoff explains that because of this "niche programming," viewers will become the future programmers of television, and the big three networks as they currently exist, will steadily lose their appeal (Tartikoff 206).

This book has provided valid arguments, verifying the reasons why some network and local news stations choose to entice viewers with sensationalized stories. Tartikoff suggests that the approach reflects a panicked effort to maintain viewership and revenue (205-209).

Gamble (1986) provides a broad review of mass communication. With the range of available

communication tools, Gamble points out that the print industry and broadcast media throughout history have actively molded our society's behavior and expectations. The author writes that the media have six functions. They are to: inform, set agendas, connect with various groups in society, educate, persuade, and finally, to entertain (Gamble 5).

In his study to determine which communication medium that teenagers use most frequently to gather information, Gamble found that television was used nearly three times more than either magazines or newspapers. A separate study found that when 223 college students were asked to rank books, newspapers, magazines, records and tapes, television, radio and movies on a scale of 1 (most liked) through 7 (least liked), the results showed that television was the most popular source of obtaining news, while newspapers ranked last (12). Two questions are posed as a result of this study. First, does this poll accurately indicate a trend that the younger generations will continue to rely heavily on television news as their main source of current and world events? Second, if so, what will be the long-term outcome of a generation that knows a little about a lot of topics instead of having significant knowledge about fewer?

Gamble's book devotes an adequate amount of time to the history of the newspaper industry, with its competition for readers through contests, staged events, sensationalized and lurid topics as discussed in the introduction of this culminating project.

While authors previously mentioned in this discussion say that newspaper and magazine readership continues to decline while the television industry soars, it is ironic that print journalism is filled with criticisms of the electronic medium. One only need to read. Some of the most provocative articles and critiques uncovered for this project will be briefly summarized, due to their currentness and relevance to this topic.

A commentary titled, "A Scary Future," written by Edward Iwata, ran in the June 1991 edition of *Editor and Publisher*. It highlighted and warned that, "public distrust of the media is rampant, and that corporate influence in broadcasting may kill serious network news." It concluded that the public is guided to know only what media owners choose for it to know. "The corporate drive for ratings and revenues will continue to shut out people from airing their views" (Iwata 20-21).

In the same article, former journalist Audrie Kerause commented, "The courts and the law have

decided that the right to private property is more important than the pubic's right to media access." New York Times columnist Thomas Wicker commented on "the death of strong, independent reporting in the tradition of Walter Cronkite" (Iwata 21).

Public Relations Journal printed "Dealing With 'Tabloid' Broadcasters" in May 1990. The article detailed how just about anyone now has the opportunity to be scandalized on television at least once in their lifetime. The article credits the phenomenon of syndicated "tabloid television" or "trash television" shows. Written by Fran Matera, the article details steps a person should take before being allowed to be interviewed. Matera wrote of today's journalists, "They are looking for that one killer shot where they catch you stammering and fumbling. That's what sells, and earns the reporter accolades" (Matera 32-33).

"Murder Has Become A Television News Staple," according to an article which appeared in the *St. Charles Journal* in January 1993. The article highlighted a recent incident which appeared on television stations across the nation, including St. Louis local stations. A woman in Miami was shot to death by her former husband as a television camera for the syndicated tabloid show *A Current Affair* caught the scene. MacBryde questions whether or not an event

of domestic violence which occurred in Miami ranks of value to a St. Louis audience, no matter how gripping it may be. He also questions if the use of the video of the man shooting his wife, and the screams from the witnesses, were handled with tact or used purely for profit? Interviews of the St. Louis news directors indicate the latter (MacBryde 11D). KMOV News Director Gary Whitaker says that if the shooting hadn't been caught on tape, his station probably would not have aired the story at all (Mink 9E). Because this incident deals directly with decisions made by news directors in the St. Louis market, it will be further highlighted in Chapter 4.

In a separate article appearing in *Broadcasting* magazine in March of 1992, Richard Sabreen, Vice President and General Manager of Group W News Services, addressed what the future holds for television stations broadcasting news. Sabreen writes that by the year 2000 and beyond, "producers" will have become obsolete. Instead media organizations will employ "news buyers" who scan computer screens and video monitors buying news. Sabreen believes that these news buyers will feed local and regional news channels with an "uninterrupted stream of the best audience-attracting news stories they can buy" (Sabreen 63).

Sabreen writes that the future of broadcast news will have very little human contact. Media decisions of what will be aired will be decided by an even fewer number of media "elite." Consultants, reporters and news managers will no longer be influential in what goes on the air. Instead, only one person empowered to purchase news stories for numerous news programs within a given region, will be responsible for the information that the public will view. The only place for human presence will be in the field, and even those people will be reduced dramatically. "Synthetic on camera talent can be created if it's felt a human being is needed to deliver a story on screen" (Sabreen 63).

In analyzing literature obtained for this project, a consensus by the authors was discovered. Most authors dedicated a great quantity of effort into proving the theory that television has an overwhelming ability to guide the thoughts of its audience and therefore provoke action. Yet, while this great power exists, each author provides crucial evidence to prove that most media executives who are responsible for the distribution of news accept no responsibility to use this tool to educate, inform and improve our society. Media executives believe the role of televised news programs is to make money and entertain. The

education of society is only an expendable, secondary benefit.

The review of literature also brought to light the question of whether or not television ratings are an accurate measure of the wants and needs of the viewing audience since not everyone who is randomly chosen to take part in the sample, agrees to do so. Some questioned whether television's ratings represent only a specific demographic and psychographic area.

My research uncovered few writers, including those who hold positions within the television field, who have a different view of the broadcast news industry. While many supported a private business's right to air its choice of programming, each claimed that news programs were aired, in most instances, for the sole purpose of obtaining greater ratings.

Television is a new medium, having existed as one with a mass access and appeal for less than a century. Therefore, society is still analyzing and questioning the effects that this medium has had on its culture. Is television a reflection of our society or does it have the power to persuade people to become what an "elite few" choose for us to be? Consequently, until these questions can be answered, media managers must carefully analyze the effects that their decisions may have on their audience.

CHAPTER THREE
SELECTIVE REVIEW AND EVALUATION OF RESEARCH

To more closely concentrate on the issues raised in the previous section, this chapter will investigate further the issue of television news as a responsibility to the public, versus television news as a private business. It will describe the trend of how sensationalized tabloid style news is slowly beginning to blend into the traditional news networks, and explore media professionals' claim that this development represents a threat to a society which has placed great dependence on the credibility of TV news. Information from several media specialists whose work specifically deals with this topic, as well as excerpts from personal interviews conducted with professionals in our local media industry, will be included in this chapter.

Nimmo (1990), as mentioned by most of the authors in Chapter 2, found that recent opinion polls indicate that most Americans receive their knowledge of current events from televised news. Moreover, Nimmo found

that those who rely wholly on television news believe it to be a credible source (Nimmo 25). The author believes that people rely so heavily on a medium which does not inform them because it supplies fantasy. Viewers, according to Nimmo, have little knowledge of what happens outside their immediate surroundings, and therefore look to television, which can supply them with people and places that they can only imagine (26).

Television provides a rapid and effortless way of obtaining information. Generally, when complex issues need to be judged, a person will draw on his/her knowledge of the topic in order to reach a reasonable conclusion. This method, if done on one's own, is time-consuming and requires effort. However, with the accessibility of television people economize by relying on the simplified versions of broadcast reports. In turn, viewers are following profit driven television's lead in "priming certain aspects of national life while ignoring others and thereby setting the terms by which political judgments are rendered and political choices are made" (27).

Nimmo writes that journalists have begun to rely heavily on "story journalism." Former NBC Nightly News Producer Reuven Frank was once quoted as saying:

> Every news story without sacrifice of probity or responsibility, displays the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouncement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and an end. These are essentials of drama. (27)

Nimmo challenges this fundamental principle of television journalism, writing that information translated into story form stands to be interpreted incorrectly, because all news stories cannot be adapted into this form effectively (29-30).

The purpose of Nimmo's book, *Media Related Politics*, is that people learn about politics and current events from the mass media. The media shapes opinions and guide society's actions. Yet what the public lacks is the knowledge that the media are a business which transforms reality into a ratings improving, money making fantasy (23-49).

Founder of the U.S.A. Radio Network, Marlin Maddoux (1990), believes that the American public is being lied to because reporters no longer present "just the facts." Maddoux says that news programs today are marketed same way as P.T. Barnum's style, a "snake-oil fashion" (Maddoux 11).

As a radio talk show host, Maddoux says that he once believed strongly in the media's ability to present the facts. His radio talk show was an outlet to many who voiced their discontent with the media's biases. Maddoux, who at the time still believed in the media's ability to be fair and accurate, responded to the complaints in an annoyed manner, pointing out that the media are what made America great. The freedom of the press, he argued, was even guaranteed to citizens through an amendment to the constitution. However, as the number of complaints about media biases began to increase, Maddoux was compelled to begin his own investigation into the workings of the mass media. He was astounded by his findings which showed that the news networks were not presenting all of the facts, staging material and, in general, distorting the news (Maddoux 9-14).

Maddoux found that, as a news entity, radio is used much differently than television. Radio has a tendency to be somewhat more credible than television, because TV is an action medium.

> Media people are not out to promote an organized, civilized society. That's too mundane, too boring. Such a mission wouldn't do a thing to create excitement, so

> the cameras seek out those who are out of step with the majority of the population. Shock serves the purpose of the television camera. (24)

Maddoux says the reason for the "shock value news" comes back to the bottom line. Television's first job is to bring in the numbers. The news station, a privately owned organization, only makes money if the consumer watches. "It makes no difference if the show is called the evening news. It's all the same. It's show business" (25).

However, Maddoux's main concern is that although the news industry is "show business," it is presenting itself as a credible source from which factual information can be obtained. The public will believe what the media present because the research and investigative work has been left for the "professionals" to find (25).

Maddoux says that the media are our "window on the world," and that through it we see events, opinions, etc. If an event does not appear on television, we have been socialized to believe that it cannot be very important. The media, to a certain degree, tell us how to think.

Speaking before a meeting of the Radio-Television News Directors Association, newsman David Brinkley made the statement that, "Most Americans don't read newspapers for their news, most watch television. All they know about public policy is what we tell them," (72) a statement which angers Maddoux. Because of the seriousness of a growing population which knows only fragments about subjects which directly affect them, Maddoux calls for society to take another look at television news. One solution to the problem is for the public to more closely analyze the credibility and accuracy of stories broadcast over the public airwaves by those in the television news medium (72).

Shoemaker (1991) found that over the years, values found in newsrooms across the country have become fairly predictable. News directors value what they believe the public will find interesting (90). Shoemaker notes that emphasis on dramatic principles keeps reporters from giving more comprehensive reports (94).

Once again, as noted by the majority of the aforementioned authors, the main reason for the distortion of news is that media organizations often find themselves controlled by non-media owners. For example, GE owns NBC. RJR Nabisco owns a 20% share in the cable network ESPN. This draws the discussion

back to the conflict of public good versus private business. Shoemaker found that for most media organizations, the primary goal is to make a profit.

Like Nimmo, Shoemaker says that media managers, out to make a profit, regularly use their reporters as storytellers. But he points out that reality cannot always be neatly packaged, with a beginning, middle and an end. Following this sort of routine, which many media organizations do, carries its own form of distortion. The new emphasis has turned to dramatic principles which keep reporters from giving a more comprehensive report (94).

Yet the strongest point Shoemaker suggests is that the ultimate power lies in ownership. The major television networks are complex organizations. He uses the following complicated and sometimes messy example of the ABC organization to demonstrate the channels through which news is funnelled:

> Reporters, writers, producers and camera operators report to the executive producer, who then reports to the president of the ABC News division. The news head is one of five presidents who reports to the president of the television network group. He and the heads of the broadcast group also hold

> titles with the larger Capital Cities/ABC Inc., parent company, which has its own corporate management team headed by the chair of the board and chief executive officer. (126)

ABC managers of other news operations at its owned and operated stations go through the same chain of command. In other words, after going through the corporate chain, Shoemaker asks, how can news networks not be biased in the information they present to the public? Even more, with such a long chain of command, the notion of news is lost and profits are highlighted (126).

Much information for this thesis was obtained through articles written by *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* media critic Eric Mink. In a personal interview with Mink about the quality of St. Louis' local television news stations, he stated that most or all of the news series aired on the local news stations are simply "vehicles to entice viewers to watch their newscasts." Mink says it's difficult to say what response viewers have had to this type of programming because while many viewers complain of the tone, style and absence of content found in the series, there are many

instances when the programming works and viewer ratings are boosted.

Overall, Mink feels that because of negative local press, the stations are beginning to realize on their own, that they have gone too far with the sensationalized sleaze used to increase viewer ratings. KSDK news reporter John Noel agrees, admitting that in the last few ratings periods his station received complaints from viewers about the "lack of substantive and positive programming."

> In the past, (KSDK) presented series that were pure titillation, such as 'Born Again Virgins,' but I think we are now moving away from the sleaze series or subjects that I feel are examples of hype. Some of the series we do now concentrate on people driving on revoked drivers licenses, and problems with the juvenile justice system.

Noel says that the overall quality of KSDK news stories are straightforward and are not over sensationalized. However, when asked what he would like to see changed in the KSDK broadcasts he added:

> I would like to do series which are more

> substantive. More series with information that people can use. There are a lot of things that we could cover that we don't cover. But I don't make those decisions; it's all part of the big picture of a newscast that the management at Channel 5 has to look at and decide.

Critic Eric Mink says that although nationwide the amount of local television news sensationalism varies from city to city, the objective is always the same, "to inflate viewers and profit." When questioned about St. Louis station KMOV's promotion that required viewers to watch the "Golden Girls" syndicated program before the news, then watch the newscast at 5pm in order to win the contest, Mink responded:

> The *Golden Girls* contest (KMOV) had apparently worked well, but I think it is a pathetic statement used to bribe viewers to watch their newscast.

Mink closed the interview with a comment concerning the issue of public interest versus private business. He believes that viewers will tune in with more regularity, if station management decreases the

amount of lurid and sensationalized topics currently bombarding the audience.

> I don't begrudge the news stations for producing a product and trying to make a living, but I think it's possible to do that without sinking to the sensational level.

Finally, *Rolling Stone Magazine* printed an article appearing in the February 18th, 1993 edition, which directly deals with the world of tabloid television news. "The Big Sleaze," as the article was called, deals with the increasing number of entertainment programs such as *A Current Affair, Hard Copy, Inside Edition* and *The Reporters*, which have had a negative impact on the way local "news" stations have begun to package their own news.

Krista Bradford, author of the article, and former tabloid TV employee now working as a reporter for WNBC-TV in New York, says that most of the stories which appear on the tabloid programs are of little public importance. But says Bradford, there are two simple facts which make unimportant stories significant: "There is video, and there are the tabloid shows...Shows like *A Current Affair* are messing with people's lives - not only the individuals exploited in tabloid television's stories, but also

the viewers seduced on the other side of the screen" (Bradford 39).

Bradford, who once worked in the St. Louis television market, says that truth is far less important than the sexy story. She says, "I learned that interviews are regularly purchased by brokers and that tabloid TV cuts deals, agreeing to cover notorious characters favorably." Bradford says that she has watched "reality become fiction in the edit bays as news footage was intercut with movie scenes and music videos and tarted up with sound effects and music" (40).

Bradford's account of tabloid television news is similar with Karen Koman's article which ran in *St. Louis Magazine's*, November 1991 issue. Koman wrote of her experiences at St. Louis station KSDK, calling its form of reporting, "take no-prisoners television." "The similarities between producing a music video and creating a KSDK series are uncanny" (Koman 46).

Bradford says she regularly reported stories dealing with a wide range of sensationalized topics, from a forest ranger who was sure he saw Bigfoot, to a Sheriff who had rented a video camera to make x-rated movies with his wife. Bikini girls selling hot dogs in G-strings by the highway in Florida was another topic Bradford aired (Bradford 41).

This article describes some of the stories aired by tabloid broadcasters, and yet, as Bradford writes, many viewers will take the stance, "Hey, lighten up. These shows are meant to entertain, to have a little fun with the news." But how much should the viewing public be forced to "lighten up" when the local stations, envious of the financial success of the tabloids, are beginning to imitate the sensationalism (40)? St. Louis' own broadcast stations seem to be following the tabloid's lead.

Mink wrote in his February 5, 1993 column about the type of "raunchy on-air" stories St. Louis station KPLR-TV airs. Stories about "women who wrestle in Jell-O for a living" and the story entitled, "Knocked Up," about gorilla propagation. Incidentally, after "Knocked Up" aired, audience response was enough to have the news director fired (Mink 11G). The station's general manager Hal Protter issued the statement:

> We're not going to create sleaze. We're going to rethink our approach. We're probably going to pull back 10 or 20 percent from the Miami hot look and be more sensitive to the community. (11G)

Based on the research for this chapter, the debate between public service and private business is facing gridlock. While the Federal Communications Commission argues that broadcast operations must serve the public's interest, many believe that media managers are distorting the truth, and brainwashing the viewing audience in the interest of increased ratings. If the television medium chooses to entertain the audience, then the promotional emphasis should be placed on "entertainment," rather than selling the theory of "factual, credible news."

An article appearing in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* detailed a recent lawsuit which proved to be an example of public interest versus private business. In February 1993, General Motors Corporation filed suit against NBC, alleging that a report broadcast through the network's news program *Dateline NBC*, staged a fiery explosion, thereby misrepresenting the company's C/K pickup trucks ("NBC Settles Suit Over Crash Test").

Critics claim that the truck's fuel tank, located outside the vehicle's frame, is prone to explosions when the truck is impacted from the side. NBC, investigating this theory, broadcast a report on *Dateline NBC* in November of 1992, showing a 40 mile per hour side-impact to the truck, which then caused

the truck to burst into flames. It was later discovered, however, that NBC staged the explosion by "triggering remote-controlled, toy-rocket motors on the truck's underside." General Motor's spokesman, Ed Lechtzin commented, "They (NBC) had one purpose there, to create a visual for television" ("NBC Settles Suit Over Crash Test").

When GM brought suit against NBC, the network admitted that portions of the GM truck story had, indeed, been fabricated to peak audience interest. "We agree with GM that we should have told our viewers about these devices," said an NBC spokesperson ("NBC Settles Suit Over Crash Test").

The GM/NBC demonstration is, yet, another instance when the viewing audience believes that they are being informed by a credible news source. Although NBC obtained documented information which raised questions about a potential problem with the way the GM trucks were manufactured, the crash test demonstration broadcast by the news program knowingly misrepresented the results of the test. This demonstration was not an error in reporting, but rather an attempt to stun an audience.

CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

Throughout this thesis, many examples and opinions have been provided giving credibility to the power of television. Television is a medium which has the awesome power to inform, infuriate, and bring cause for action. In many respects, media watchers, critics, and the public have called for more comprehensive and insightful information to be broadcast throughout this medium. An overwhelming number of media managers believe that what the public truly wants is what the public supports, and in their own defense, sensationalism has been what the ratings say sells big.

A study report by Robinson and Levy carefully analyzed the findings of fifteen separate studies conducted over a twenty year period (1964-1984). The purpose was to find if those who are heavy television viewers are more likely to be consistently better or worse informed than users of other media. These studies involved a wide range of informational

content, study designs, age groups, geographical locations, and information settings.

A combination of the studies determined five main results. They are as follows:

(1) Education is the most important background predictor. Those with lower educational levels had a higher awareness of entertainment personalities and a lower awareness of cultural terms and issues.

(2) More extensive use of the print media sources in newspapers, magazines, and books is associated with higher information levels across all topics.

(3) More frequent viewing of TV newscasts is associated with below-average scores on issues concerning current events.

(4) People who watch more general television than average have lower news information scores, but higher than average information about entertainment personalities.

(5) Extensiveness of interpersonal conversations and friendship networks is generally related to higher information scores, but generally not as high as those

for print media exposure. (Robinson and Levy 57-85, 242-246)

In essence, not one of the 15 studies proved that viewers of television newscasts emerged as much more informed than nonviewers. That is especially true for those who claim that television is their main source for information. The studies showed that the greater number of hours that television was viewed, the lower the information level, with the exception of one area, knowledge of entertainment and entertainers (83).

Those whose information level ranked high were readers of newspapers and newsmagazines. While these people reported that they viewed television, they did not rely on it as a credible news source (83).

The evaluation of the studies also revealed that "television news acts as an information leveler for the less-educated segments of society, raising them closer to the overall average, but at the same time depressing the scores of the college educated closer to the average" (84).

Many media experts say that in order to compete against an increasing number of television channels, most appealing to a niche audience, news stations claiming to be journalistically superior to the tabloid programs have become obsessed with sex,

violence, and anchor chit chat. St. Louis stations have used wacky contests to entice viewers into watching their newscasts, and placed syndicated, sensationalized tabloid journalism shows just before the local news in hopes of drawing more people into the early evening news broadcasts. The result has left viewers with overdramatized local news reports airing little more than sketchy stories. Consequently, ratings have been boosted slightly, but evaluating the ratings more closely shows that KTVI, KMOV and KSDK have not made a significant move in the local ratings game in more than 15 years.

According to survey information obtained through the *Arbitron Syndicated Programs Analysis* for St. Louis news stations, beginning July 1992, *A Current Affair*, which airs in the hour preceding St. Louis station KTVI's 5pm newscast, is seen by an estimated 5,013,000 households nationwide during all dayparts, seven days a week. Of the 5,013,000 households who watch this program, 4,391,000 view *A Current Affair* during the weekday early fringe, which is between the hours of 4-8 in the evening. This information roughly calculated means that nearly 80% of all households view this program immediately before or immediately following their city's early evening newscast, such as

the programming currently practiced by KTVI (Arbitron, July 1989, Vol. I 905).

Once the program is turned on inside the household, Arbitron estimates that the demographics of those who watch the tabloid television shows tend to slightly favor women. Of those people watching *A Current Affair*, 58% are women 18 and older, as compared to 42% men in the same age group (905).

Ratings information for the 1992 year, indicates that KTVI's ratings for its 5pm newscast had increased 46% from 1991. While a greater majority of women are "keyed" into KMOV's *Golden Girl* contest, KTVI's ratings gain is a result of nearly doubling the station's female viewers. *Hard Copy*, which follows *A Current Affair* in the St. Louis market, ranked number one with men 18 and older, and second with women of the same age group. Nevertheless, the tabloid news programs running before the "local" newscasts rate high among viewers, and have since their placement before the news programs, nearly doubled viewership (906).

Inside Edition, airing in the hour preceding KSDK's early evening news during the same ratings period, had similar audience numbers (2095).

The programming found before the early newscast in St. Louis has changed dramatically over the years.

In 1978, Arbitron reported that programs which preceded the newscasts in the St. Louis market had little or no shock appeal which would taint the early evening news program. For example, KTVI which now airs the tabloid television programs *A Current Affair*, and *Hard Copy* before their newscast, previously aired the *Merv Griffin* show followed by the sitcom the *Mary Tyler Moore* show. KSDK, which in 1992 aired the tabloid program *Inside Edition* in the hour preceding its news program, aired *Big Valley* in 1978 (*Inside Edition's* rating's results were similar to those involving KTVI, *A Current Affair* and *Hard Copy*). Following the same trend, KMOV (formally known as KMOX-TV in 1978), aired *Dinah* (Arbitron, July 1978 82).

Does airing a sensationalized, "entertainment" tabloid show before the regular newscast truly increase overall station ratings and profit? Although KTVI reports that its 5pm newscast has nearly doubled since placing the tabloid shows before the news, it is worth noting that since 1978, Arbitron ratings information shows that the overall placement of the stations in the St. Louis market has changed little. In 1978, KSDK led the ratings, followed by KMOV, (known as KMOX-TV in '78), and KTVI brought up the

rear. 1992 information shows the stations in the same positions (82).

While news program ratings are currently mimicking those in 1978, some argue that if the news channels had not followed the trend of scheduling tabloid shows and viewer contests before the news in competition with other market programming, the ratings hold could have changed dramatically. Yet, what has this back-to-back programming done to the viewer perception of what news should be? Are sensationalized, tabloid programs leaving viewers of traditional news thirsty for more appealing bloodshed murder stories as well as silly series, which incidentally have been said to do little more than entertain? Many researchers believe that this programming trend may be creating a generation of viewers who are having a difficult time identifying the distinction between factual and fictional news.

Most media managers make the bottom line decision as to what type of news their viewers will find appealing, and many media organizations often find themselves controlled by managers or corporations which have little interest in news which is informative. Instead, their news values are guided by the goal of making a profit. The structure of many media operations begins with a board of directors and

gradually funnels down through the ranks of president, general manager, news director, producer, and finally news writer/reporter, who, in turn, following through on the emphasis to present a dramatic story, is kept from reporting a comprehensive, informative report (Shoemaker, 128).

This management structure is greatly affecting the quality of television news reports. Eric Mink noted in a January 1993 column:

> There's death and destruction in Iraq, the United States is getting a new president, and St. Louis television stations are warring over a baby elephant. (Mink 7F)

The conflict, incidentally, involved the naming of a newly born elephant at the St. Louis Zoo.

The headline "Murder Has Become A Television News Staple," jumped off the page of the January 27, 1993 issue of the *St. Charles Journal's* entertainment section. The decision local news directors made to air a tape of a woman being shot to death by her former husband as the tabloid television show *A Current Affair* attempted to interview her at the cemetery where her daughter had recently been buried (MacBryde 11D).

Three primary news channels in St. Louis each handled the airing of the event differently. KMOV aired the clip in its entirety, KTVI ran the video up to the point the shooting began, and then froze the video and continued to air the audio of the gunshots and screams, and KSDK chose not to air the event (11D).

MacBryde argued that the airing of the video, or even the story by St. Louis news stations, was news purely for shock value. The murder had occurred in Miami, and by MacBryde's opinion, was of little news value to St. Louis audiences.

> What do you want to bet that many hours after the shooting, which occurred in a cemetery incidentally, there was at least one breathless reporter doing a live shot from the site? 'Mere hours ago here, on this very spot..'. (11D)

St. Louis Post-Dispatch columnist Eric Mink also devoted column space to this same topic, quoting Gary Whitaker, news director at KMOV, who aired the clip in its entirety, as saying, "It happened, and it was interesting." According to Mink's column, Whitaker acknowledged that if the shooting hadn't been caught

on tape, his station probably would not have aired the story at all (Mink 9E).

KTVI news director Bill Berra, who chose to freeze the picture when the shooting began, said, "It gives you an uneasy feeling, and my opinion was that you get the same idea hearing the audio track." However, KSDK's news director Cliff Abromats, explained, "What we had was 20 seconds of video and very few facts about it. It was an isolated incident of violence. I didn't see that it served any purpose" (9E).

While media managers are making the decision to spice up a news story to entice the public into watching the program, ratings compiled by the A.C. Nielsen Company for prime-time programs aired January 18 through January 24, 1993, show that the number one rated program of the week belonged to CBS's long running *60 Minutes* program. This indicates that the general viewing audience is not turned away by news reporting that they believe is credible and informative. Incidentally, ABC's hour long news program, *20/20*, captured the number twelve spot for that week ("Neilsen Ratings").

The research covered in this chapter indicates that with the advent of television people have had more direct access to news events which have been

interpreted for them by reporters and media managers who are driven not by the need to broadcast in the public interest by presenting substantive stories based on fact and fairness, but rather by the need to broadcast in the interest of the corporation, which creates a financial need to appeal to all educational levels of those in society. Even if a reporter honestly tries to present a story fairly, the tone and style of the story will reflect a certain degree of bias.

Even more, inaccurate news which is knowingly broadcast as credible news, has led to viewers who increasingly know less about more. The everlasting effects may weigh heavier on those who have become solely dependent on the TV for their news and information.

CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

Sensationalism, which was once found in newspapers as a result of fierce competition for the audience, is now becoming a tool that is widely used in television.

It has been calculated that in the average home, the television is turned on for nearly seven hours each day, a fact which has boosted broadcast communications into a multi-billion dollar industry. Those who have studied the media know that it does have an impact on society, but because television is a relatively new medium, little is known about the short or long term effects.

The mass audience that network television has enjoyed is, however, as media executive Brandon Tartikoff noted in his recent book *The Last Great Ride*, an endangered species, and one not likely to make a comeback. Consequently, in an effort to compete for audience share, the three big networks

(ABC, CBS, NBC), as well as local news stations, are fighting the current niche marketing trend (206).

Tartikoff admits that with the specialized programing found on cable television, the audience has the increasing power to "turn on whatever acts turn (them) on" (209). The viewers are no longer subject to the generalized programing still practiced by ABC, CBS and NBC. Tartikoff believes that the competition from cable networks delivering specialized programing has news media executives trying to woo viewers through sensationalized and lurid topics. The mass audience, says Tartikoff, is notoriously unreceptive to even the most significant programing not packaged for entertainment value (209).

An instance in which a network news program bowed to reduce their standards for "entertainment value" involves the story by NBC, which explored allegations that the CK model trucks made by GM were likely to explode if impacted from the side (Chapter 3). A thorough discussion within the bounds of a graduate level Marketing Management class concerning the NBC/GM controversy, found that the majority of students did not believe that *Dateline NBC* was capable of fabricating sections of the story which was broadcast in November 1992. Many class members believed that General Motors Corporation filed suit against NBC on

the basis that GM was trying to simply cover for a defective product.

NBC later admitted that some of the information in the original report was knowingly misreported. Nevertheless, the evidence that numerous educated people believed so strongly in the credibility of a television news report supports various theories that the public, to a large extent, is passively allowing television reporters to guide their thoughts to the extent that the credibility of a major corporation, General Motors, is also called into question. The head of the Media Communications Department at Webster University, Art Silverblatt, commented about the GM/NBC incident:

> It's an ever-growing pressure in an industry that's competing for viewers' time with other media. It's a really desperate atmosphere. Every story has to be entertaining and dramatic and have a beginning, middle and end. They're making news choices based on those things. (Mink 1C)

The media's biased coverage can, indeed, mislead the viewer's perceptions of reality. This was discovered as rioting ensued in the spring of 1992,

after the officers accused of beating black motorist Rodney King were acquitted. Scores of lives were lost as neighborhoods were burned and looters destroyed area businesses. The violence left more than fifty dead, two-thousand injured, and one-billion dollars worth of ruin ("How The Defense Dissected The Tape").

Although the root of the violence has been attributed to deep emotional scars within U.S. society, few critics argued that the power of the media played an intregral part in provoking the violence by convicting the officers before the trial. The media, in their effort to gain increased ratings and revenue, aired only a portion of the vicious police assault which was caught on videotape. Media executives took no responsibility to air the tape in its entirety. Jury members claim the tape, played in its entirety, relayed a different story than what the public witnessed on the news. According to jurors, in the first 25 seconds of the tape, King was on his feet and lunged toward Officer Laurence Powell. Jury members also say that the tape showed that police were provoked to physically restrain King ("How The Defense Dissected The Tape").

The point of this example, however, is not to prove the guilt or innocence of those involved in the Rodney King/Los Angeles Police confrontation. The

example does prove that our system has left it possible for mass misunderstandings and violence to occur again. The television medium convicted the police officers before the trial. In doing so, they convinced most in society that the officers were in fact guilty. Consequently, by raising the hopes of those in the community that the officers would be convicted, the television medium helped to provoke the violence. The television news stations must begin to learn from their mistakes, and report on events unsensationally and objectively.

Ian MacBryde, an independent video producer and former television executive, says the warnings from news anchors about the upcoming shocking and graphic footage has left many viewers cold, "...we're starting to hear that message so frequently it is losing some of its appeal" (MacBryde 11D).

Feedback from media critic, Eric Mink, on the issues found in this thesis, shows that the media's credibility and integrity will eventually be lost if the public finds that news stations continually report inaccurate or staged information. The local stations, responding to recent criticism, have realized that they have gone too far and now are attempting to become less sensationalistic. St. Louis based programs, by comparison to news programs nationwide,

are somewhat tame in content, as compared to news stations in other areas of the country such as New York, Los Angeles and Miami.

Past ratings periods in the St. Louis market have been known to see the emergence of topics dealing with born-again virgins, how to steal automobiles, local sin centers, and a host of other series centering on sex and scandal. The series mellowed in the November sweeps period, moving away from the sex and bringing out the "Gotcha" tactics. In an effort to present the viewers with useful information, KMOV and KSDK went head-to-head to catch ordinary people in a variety of situations from silly to serious.

Nevertheless, until society can determine the effects that broadcast news has on society, journalists must carefully review the way news is written and broadcast. One journalist may possess one view while another holds a separate view. While both have access to the same facts, and if both attempt to present the story as fairly and accurately as possible, the world view of each will undeniably and inevitably affect the outcome and angle of the story. The point is that if reporters are truly trying to be fair and accurate, some degree of bias will still enter the story. What happens, then, to the

consumer's view of reality when a reporter or news station knowingly presents inaccurate information?

News consumers can help to curb the amount of biased news that they received by better learning how to consume information. As the research in Chapter 4 shows, those who obtain their information from a variety of sources generally are able to determine their own conclusions. Although television news appears to be a short cut to obtaining information, it is important to remember that most news is presented in a style designed to entertain.

Television is not a completely ineffective source for *certain* information. Evidence does show that television exposure among the less-educated serves as an information leveler. Television also raises the information level on entertainment events and personality.

It cannot be stated often enough that TV has the awesome ability to reach large quantities of people, as well as the ability to bring far away places into one's living room. Television allowed the nation to watch the swearing in of a new president, and it brought the reality of Operation Desert Storm home to those with family members across the ocean. The central focus of this thesis, however, deals with the

rising trend of sensationalized, tabloid television news within the traditional evening news formats.

The purpose is to dispel the myth that all information found on the news programs is accurate and credible. Consumers must realize that television is a visual medium and that its news shows which thrive in ratings and subsequently in profits are based on the ability to attract audience through stunning video. Reporter Krista Bradford says that working for nearly five years in the tabloid broadcast business has made her a bit oversensitive on the subject:

> All around me I see the tabloid's corrupting influence - in local news, in political campaigns, in movies of the week, even creeping into the staid network newsmagazine shows, which are resorting more frequently to hidden cameras and other tabloid techniques. (Bradford 69)

Currently, media managers are winning the debate over public interest versus private business. This study has revealed that the airwaves do not belong to the public, but to media organizations. NBC proved this point in the late 1980's when they chose not to investigate the existence of a plutonium laden space shuttle scheduled to be launched by NASA.

In the event of an accident, millions of people could have died from lethal exposure to the plutonium which Project Galileo carried. However, after being questioned about why the network had not reported on NASA's Project Galileo, former NBC News President Reuven Frank flatly denied the existence of the project saying:

> You know this paranoia masquerading as journalism really doesn't interest me. I really don't believe (Project Galileo) exists. If there was a plan to do that it would be reported. (99)

NBC's parent company, General Electric, took in over $130 million building generators for Project Galileo. This event has been interpreted by many media watchers as a case of operating in the interest of the corporate structure rather than the public's interest as specified by the FCC (99). Ethically, where should news organizations draw the line?

Currently, news programming decisions are driven by ratings. But are ratings even that accurate? While the corporate structure stands behind the ratings, many argue that only a certain "type" of person will allow the ratings companies to monitor their viewing habits. Thus, generalizations regarding

the mass audience based on this sampling must be regarded as dubious.

Future studies on the television news industry should investigate how we as a society can better understand the consequences of the short and long term effects that the television medium has on the public. It has already been determined that television news has an impact on public socialization, to what extent is still unknown.

Television journalists' knowledge of their audiences needs to be further investigated. It seems as if journalists do not have a highly defined conception of their audience. Having worked as a reporter, I have found that many journalists try to justify their reports by claiming that oddities are commonplace in the industry. If journalists gain a higher awareness of the intelligence level of their viewers, will it force journalists to become more insightful about the topics they report? Delivering information to a society which knows a little about a greater number of topics does have its advantages. Reporters are not under the pressure to legitimize their work to shield it from criticism.

Offices of the government are consistently investigated and criticized for the number of ill

workings within the system. But who closely governs society's watchdog?

> The sooner the newspeople and their superiors accept this starting-point, the better for them, us and 'the news.' In this way they can, after all, learn something from outsiders, even if outsider don't know all the jargon of their trade, even if the outsiders are those always suspect academics, or worse, social scientist academics. (Robinson and Levy 228)

Predicting the future is difficult. The fact is that there are no pat answers nor tailor-made guides that will lead television broadcast stations to instant solutions for improving the quality of news stories. One of the goals for local television broadcast stations should be to strive to be the benchmark for other stations in the industry. Local and national news programs may lessen their dilemma of being all things to all audiences if they can develop a market niche. Many businesses including radio, magazines, newspapers, and cable networks are working with the idea of marketing to a specific audience. Yet the traditional news programs have yet to explore this option.

Television is a tool. It will be no better or worse than those who use it. As new issues arise, standards and the freedom to broadcast will continue to be debated, for they are on-going.

The need for the media as well as the strong distrust for this entity was best summed up in 1815 by John Adams, "Mankind cannot now be governed without the press, nor at present with it" (Lemert 9).

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