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Abstract

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Comments

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Local Television: Producing Soft News

by Joseph Turow

A reliance on prepackaged features and public relations sources, coupled with a desire for upbeat, visually interesting stories, results in a similarity of soft news across programs and stations, despite differing programming strategies.

Research on journalism has long noted that news, like fiction, is at heart “an exercise of power over the interpretation of reality” (3, p. 81). Over the years, scholars interested in that interpretative power have tended to concern themselves with the ability of news to cast up agendas for the public on crucial social and political issues that might require collective action or evaluation. As a result, they have tended to explore the selection and display of what journalists call “hard news”—national, international, and local affairs of government, as well as other matters, such as criminal acts or trials, that the journalists consider urgent, collective concerns. Much less sustained attention has been paid to an area of news that deals with other, less urgent aspects of life—non-criminal tales of ordinary people, descriptions of lifestyles, and observations about the arts—that journalists call “soft news” or “features” (1, p. 65; 8, p. 51).

This relative neglect is unfortunate, since soft news, whether conveyed through a recited story, an interview, a film, or a tape, presents agendas about lifestyles, activities, and meanings that may very well carry profound implications. A study by Curran *et al.* (2) of “human interest stories” (soft news plus crime tales) is particularly suggestive on this point. They found that human interest material in British newspapers cumulatively describes a world of everyday people and events that

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is fragmented—"divided into a diverse collection of interactions"—and, at the same time, disconnected from what journalists typically consider hard news territory: "the distant, abstract socioeconomic conflicts among major institutions" (p. 315).

The researchers contend that this disconnection of the soft news world from the hard news world serves to mask considerations of social structure and the institutions that link various soft news topics to one another and soft news topics to hard news concerns. They suggest, moreover, that the social forces underlying soft news stories are further submerged through an uncontroversial, "imaginary" unity that the press gives to the fragmented world. It is a facile unity that binds otherwise disconnected stories through general remarks on the "universality of individual experience. . . [and through an] overall frame of national identity and common national interest" (pp. 315-316).

Curran and his colleagues argue that continual presentation of the soft news world as fragmented and separate from the hard news domain might have severe consequences. It might lead people to turn away from exploring whether the lifestyles and social experiences they carry out every day relate in some systematic way to their place in the socioeconomic structure and system of governance. That, in turn, might discourage people from trying to correct problems they perceive in these areas through active involvement in government.

Such a concern is heightened in view of the large flow of soft news that newspapers, books, magazines, and television programs channel to audiences. In the United States, for example, there has been an increasing tendency by local television broadcasters to schedule programs that focus strongly on the highlights and sidelights of daily living (7, 8). Some of these programs—"Hour Magazine" and "Entertainment Tonight," for example—are syndicated nationally and purchased intact by local stations. A good many others, however, are created at the local level by either the programming department or the news department (9); one of the most popular soft news programs, "PM Magazine," found in 76 stations (4), is created partly by the local station and partly by the syndicating organization.

In addition to full-length programs devoted to soft news, features are increasingly used within general local news programs. Their use is particularly evident in news shows broadcast at noon—recent additions to the schedule in many markets—and early evening newscasts, which are expanding in many localities from a half hour to an hour or two or even three. Some television industry observers and executives predict, moreover, that local broadcasters will produce a good deal more of their own soft news programming in the future. They feel that the cultivation of a local image, through both soft and hard news, will help local stations

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survive the proliferation of cable-delivered channels from around the country that threaten to divert audiences in small and large cities from indigenous broadcasts (5, 7).

Assuming that the world of soft news is as Curran et al. describe it (and impressions suggest it is), how might the production of soft news for TV lend to the creation of such a world?

To begin to answer this question, I conducted a comparative investigation in the summer of 1981 of four local television programs that devote a regular portion of their time to non-criminal tales of ordinary people, descriptions of lifestyles, and/or observations about the arts. The three stations that produce these shows are located in a midwestern U.S. city that ranks in size among the top 25 markets in the country.

Two of the programs are produced by station news departments. One is a live interview series, "Your Show," which airs for an hour every weekday on an independent station. The second, a daily half-hour noon news program called "The Noon News," airs on a network affiliate.

Programming departments, rather than news departments, produce the other two shows. One, the local version of "PM Magazine," airs every weekday from 7:30 P.M. to 8:00 P.M. on a different network affiliate. The second, a half-hour interview program called "The Frank Olam

Show," sponsored and controlled by a local pharmacy chain, airs every weekday afternoon on the independent station.¹

The managements of the stations and the personnel of the programs allowed me to observe the planning and airing of their shows. I followed the production of the two interview shows for seven days and the production of "PM Magazine" and "The Noon News" for five days. In addition to observing and asking questions on the set about perspectives and procedures, I systematically noted the guests and stories that the programs aired and the ways in which consideration of those guests and stories originated. Informal discussions with staff members were augmented by formal interviews with relevant station executives, program producers, and people involved in locally produced feature "packages" for the shows.

*The world of soft news seemed shaped
less by overtly ideological pressures
than by the perspective, shared by its
producers, that soft news does not carry
the journalistic importance of hard news.*

Both the journalists and non-journalists interviewed in this study felt that, unlike hard news, tales of ordinary people, descriptions of lifestyles, and observations about the arts rarely touch on issues that demand serious public scrutiny and discussion. They perceived soft news as an easy and inexpensive way to improve a station's audience ratings and help define a station's image. As we will see, that perspective was translated into organizational demands that served to perpetuate the apolitical, fragmented, but rhetorically unified portrayal of the soft news world that Curran *et al.* describe. Of course, the common approach to soft news was made manifest in different ways for different programs, depending on the strategies and monetary concerns of the organizations involved. Extended illustration of these points will be confined to the two programs produced by the network affiliates, "PM Magazine" and "The Noon News." Subsequent discussion of the handling of specific soft news stories will refer to all four shows.

The local "PM Magazine" that was studied is part of a nationwide feature exchange cooperative initiated and administered by Group W (Westinghouse Broadcasting). While Westinghouse started "PM" in 1976, the management at the station that was studied waited until 1979 to purchase syndication rights for its market. According to the local

¹ "The Frank Olam Show" is not the actual name of the program, nor is "The Noon News" precisely what that show is called.

producer, management “wanted [“PM Magazine”] because it had been successful in other markets and they knew it would do well [here].” Principals at the station and members of the five-person local “PM Magazine” staff indicated that, by joining the cooperative, they could fulfill their need to produce a local magazine program with a minimum of direct responsibility and commitment of resources.

Most immediately, the executives wanted a general interest program about people and events that would compete strongly against the game show programming of the station’s two major competitors (the other network affiliates) in the 7:30 P.M. “prime-time access” slot. They were sure that a magazine show relating directly to people and events in their market would attract a large audience, but they were unwilling and unable (given market size and projected revenues) to justify the cost of producing a technically well done half hour themselves. Still, they believed that local programming in that half hour before network prime time was crucial, as much for long-term reasons as for immediate considerations. A cable franchise had recently been granted in the core of the station’s market and, while the program director professed not to be concerned about the immediate loss of audience, he did admit to seeing a buildup of local fare as a way to ensure against a long-term decline in audience.

The program director and other executives viewed the “PM” cooperative as designed to provide stations around the country with a show that has local identity and networklike production values on a profit-sharing budget. Most “PM” members are required to originate only one feature story, approximately 6½ minutes long, every week; some stations in the very largest markets are required to originate two such stories. All stories produced by the 76 local stations are sent to the national headquarters of “PM” in San Francisco, where the ones staffers there like most are used to create a weekly “national reel” that consists of two features for each day, plus one extra per week. In addition, nationally prepared “helpful hint” spots in three departments—“home,” “self,” and “discovery”—that run from one to two minutes are included on every day’s reel menu. Group W expects that each station will use its own locally prepared story (or stories) each week, thus eliminating two stories from the national reel. Group W does allow local stations to substitute their own “helpful hint” spots for those on the national reel, but the bulk of the program is quite fixed.

Westinghouse charges a “PM Magazine” syndication fee (for the station studied, \$840 an episode) for marketing rights and services. That fee, added to the costs of the local “PM” production operation (several hundred thousand dollars a year for the staff, a van, video equipment, and related expenses), makes the show more expensive than a syndicat-

ed game show. Yet profits have been very high, at various times exceeding even those of the news department, the historical profits leader.

Neither the feature stories, collected from various stations across the country, nor the three daily departments have a common theme. As expressed in the *PM Newsletter* (April 9, 1981), Group W suggests that the program not deal with public affairs or unhappy aspects of life.

Send good public affairs topics over to your public affairs department. . . . People watch our show as they are winding down from a hard day at work, after the hard news of the day is over. We want to remind them of what's positive and bright about life. Stories that offer viewers "a look at living with asthma" or "new educational advances for the learning disabled" are turnoffs to our audience.

Overall, the *PM Newsletter* guidelines seem to translate into formula what *Variety* (10) calls "three of the most important functions of a soft-feature magazine series": covering subjects that are visually interesting, that move along at a brisk pace, and that stay "upbeat, even when dealing with a potential downer."

To unify the wide range of the stories and departments, Group W relies on local program hosts.

The hosts help prepare the weekly local story and, more important, introduce and conclude ("wrap") every segment of each program from a place in the station's area that often relates in some way to one of the stories on the national reel. Thus, for example, a national reel that included a story on an artist who paints under hypnosis was "wrapped" from a contemporary art exhibition at the city's art museum.

Recognizing the importance of hosts to the overall "look" of the show, to attracting for advertisers a commercially healthy audience of 18- to 49-year-olds, and to helping project a feeling of unity with that audience, the "PM" cooperative has strict guidelines on who the local hosts should be. Group W mandates that each "PM" should have two hosts, a young man and a young woman who look like they might be married to (or romantically involved with) one another, who are personable, and "who leave the public with the impression that they are genuinely interested in what is going on in the community" (*PM Newsletter*, July 25, 1980). The "PM" program that was studied has such a pair. With one member of the duo hired from an area radio station, where he was a disc jockey, and the other plucked from the station's own weekend weather slot, they are both solidly local.

Localism was, in fact, an important byword of the station's program director. In tune with the national approach of "PM," though, he

described the localism not in terms of local public affairs but in terms of nearby people and events that would lend an “interesting” air to the show:

The purpose of our show as far as we’re concerned is to put our people within our area on camera. . . . To find those interesting people and make a feature out of them. People are interested in people.

The program director noted that the local “PM” ratings had dropped, due to strong game show competition, from a very high 41 percent of the viewing audience in the first year to still respectable shares in the low 30s and high 20s in the second year. The way to raise ratings, he was convinced, was to place greater emphasis on local happenings. For example, he began to urge that the producer arrange “wraps” from ongoing events such as the state fair and a baseball game. Previously, the “PM” crew had sometimes gone far afield—Mexico City, Disney World—for locally produced stories. Now, both because of budgetary tightness (due to the lower ratings) and the desire to inject stronger local flavor, the program director decreed that wraps and stories would be produced only in places that the “PM” van could travel to on a maximum of a tank of gas.

He also urged the staff to use more aggressively public relations releases, newspaper stories, and weekly brainstorming meetings to come up with local stories that could be made visually interesting. He pointed out to me that public relations agents throughout the region are eager to advise “PM” on suitable wrap or story ideas, and he gave three examples of tentative stories from a small city nearby. The city, he said, is a “rose capital” that grows “more roses under glass. . . than anyplace in the country,” it has a recreational vehicle dealership that “is the largest in the world,” and it is the site of a small husband-and-wife pie company that “sends out their pies as far away as Denver and Detroit. And they’re delicious.” “So,” he concluded, “our people, we feel, are interested in our people.”

Despite the fact that the staff of “The Noon News” deals regularly with political, economic, and military stories, their approach to soft news has much in common with that of “PM Magazine.”

All the newsroom personnel made a clear distinction between what they considered soft news and hard news. A few staffers noted that sometimes soft news could be “turned” into hard news by “the handling”—that is, by making it seem urgent. Still, all expressed a basic difference between the two forms. In the words of a top reporter,

hard news is anything that takes place on that day that is reported on that day and has some special significance—in other words, it's out of the ordinary. Which is the common definition of news. Hard news is when the maniac gets up in the tower and starts shooting at random. Hard news is a major political event; what happens at the state house, a major piece of legislation that is passed. Soft news—I like the term evergreen better. In that it's a story that doesn't have to be run today to be topical. . . . It could be something you could leave out of the program without being accused of skipping the important news of the day.

The idea that soft news can be left out of a program without leaving producers open to the accusation of “skipping important news” was volunteered by several people in the newsroom. Hard news was considered the *real* news. It was the standard by which that station and others judged its news department, an area of strong competition between the news outlets of the city, and the area of life about which reporters and news department managers expressed a responsibility to keep the public informed. Features were granted to be interesting bits of knowledge that serve to lure viewers and to help fill up time in the hour-long early evening news show.

The news assignment editor expressed the feeling, heard from members of the “PM” and “Your Show” staffs as well, that “straight news” is often so negative that material must be brought in that “brightens up the world a bit.” A good soft news story was generally thought to be one that is visually interesting, with an upbeat, positive approach to life. Soft news was considered particularly important to the noon news because, it was believed, the potential audience—“housewives, kids home for lunch, the factory worker who's off of the late shift,” in the words of one reporter—would not watch a full half hour of hard news.

The station's news director and station manager also agreed when they developed the program (which was after the two competing noon newscasts had been developed) that, since all three network affiliates would be airing similar hard news stories and some soft news regularly, the *kind* of soft news used would project the program's—and the station's—identity to the public. Since the competitors tended to emphasize exercise sessions and interviews with visiting celebrities in soft news slots, this station decided to strive for an image of being more usefully informative and community-related than the other two news shows.

People at the station realized the pragmatic importance of soft news but were reluctant to relinquish a commensurate part of the news department's human or material resources to the area. This attitude helps explain the way in which the station manager and news director

organized the portion of the noon news devoted to features. The executives had hired a few more people to cover primarily the hard news demands of the extra newscast but did not want to hire additional staff to develop soft news stories. So they turned, much in the manner of the management of "PM Magazine," to prepackaged material, both national and local.

Depending on the day, "The Noon News" may devote from about three to five of its approximately 21 minutes (excluding commercials) to features. Two nationally syndicated and four locally prepackaged series make up the regular portion of soft news time. One, "Today's Woman," takes a minute and a half to highlight upbeat activities of contemporary females in various aspects of life. It airs two or three times a week and was purchased because it was successful in many other markets. By contrast, "Hints from Heloise," homemaking advice encapsulated daily in one minute, was picked up at its inception because Heloise, a syndicated newspaper columnist, is well known and, said the station manager, "because it is cheap."

The local features that were produced by the station staff derived from management's desire to project an image of strong community interest.

Only two of the four regular feature series produced by the station require staff reporters; the other two are prepared by individuals not on the staff of the local station and require only a spare camera crew that can tape several one- or two-minute spots well in advance of their air dates. One of the regular features, on the preparation of low-cost, seasonal produce, is written, produced, and reported for free by the head of the state university's restaurant department; it airs twice a week. A second feature, offering advice on family and marital problems, airs three times a week and is written, produced, and reported by a local guidance counselor. She receives payment for her work, which includes a commitment to help produce any news specials dealing with family topics.

Their desire to project an image of strong community interest also led the news director and assignment editor to develop two feature series that use station reporters to point explicitly toward the solution of social problems. Most of the pretaping background work for the spots is done by public relations personnel of two nonprofit organizations within the city, thus saving news workers' time. One series, "Volunteer of the Week," focuses on various needs in the city that are being met through the work of people who donate time and energy. The city's nonprofit Volunteer Action Bureau coordinates the choice of one of these people for recognition every week; that individual's help is described in about 45 seconds of words and pictures by a news crew chosen on a rotating or

a "free time" basis. The second prepackaged series, "Thursday's Child," is a weekly 75-second spot done regularly by the station's investigative reporter. Suggested by its success in other cities and arranged weekly through the nonprofit Child Welfare Bureau, "Thursday's Child" highlights emotionally or physically handicapped children in an attempt to place them for adoption.

The locally produced series, like the ones the station buys from syndicators, emphasize upbeat and apolitical aspects of life, even when dealing with subjects (such as adoption) that are potentially rife with social controversy. During the course of this study, no segment of any series examined the social origin of a problem or connected a subject under discussion to activities of the society's institutions. Instead, the series focused on the way individuals can learn to cope or can help others in the community to cope. To a large extent, that focus is reflected in the titles of the series—"Hints From Heloise," "Today's Woman," "Volunteer of the Week," and "Thursday's Child." These titles, announced by the news anchors and printed on the screen, serve as a kind of rhetorical lasso. Much like the program wraps in "PM Magazine," they create a feeling of unity within and across the otherwise disconnected series segments. The effect is purposeful. The station manager said he hoped the titles would solidify the program's image to the viewer as usefully informative and community-minded.

The regular series are not the only features that appear on "The Noon News." Other soft news items are selected to end the newscast on a humorous or "believe it or not" note. Still others are program fillers for "slow news days," chosen because they reinforce the show's particular soft news image. On especially slow news days, these features might be created by a reporter and camera crew specifically for the noon program. But this kind of involvement of news personnel is rare. That is because a good deal of prepackaged soft news material is readily available through stories from the Associated Press wire, through the network affiliate news feed, and even through spots from the network's morning magazine show that can be taped for re-airing at noon. In fact, only two of 21 feature stories shown during my five days of studio observation were *not* prepackaged in one way or another.

The smaller budget and staff of the independent stations' "Your Show" and "The Frank Olam Show" forced these programs away from the mix of syndicated and locally produced packages used by the network affiliates toward a live "talk show" format that relied heavily on public relations assistance.

Use of public relations agents has already been discussed as a source with respect to some of the "wraps" and stories of "PM Magazine" and of the "Volunteer of the Week" and "Thursday's Child" features of "The

Noon News.” Public relations “facilitators” might very well also have been used in producing the programs’ syndicated material,² but that process is one step removed from the local station and so was outside the view of this study.

In “Your Show” and “The Frank Olam Show,” however, the crucial role of the public relations industry in providing the soft news agenda was strikingly evident. Both programs lacked the funds with which to purchase prepackaged materials in the manner of “PM” and “The Noon News.” Yet “Your Show” had only three people and “Frank Olam” only two (including the hosts) to coordinate the live daily programming. The staffs lacked the time to search personally for interesting guests and ideas that would fill their hour and half hour, respectively. Consequently, the producers and coordinators looked to a variety of public relations outlets as irregular but reliable providers of guests, complete with slides and other visual aids. “Your Show” also used professionally made films and tapes that commercial firms sent free to the newsroom on such subjects as retrieving silver from photographic film to keep prices down (from Kodak), making a Sears catalog, and using a “debit card” instead of a check (from Interbank/Mastercard). All in all, 65 of the 84 soft news stories covered on “Your Show” and “The Frank Olam Show” during 14 days of studio observation derived from public relations sources.

The source of soft news and the constrained budgets and staff time shaped not only the basic formats and overall world views of the programs, but the actual handling of the stories presented. Because the reporters, program hosts, and program producers devoted virtually no time to researching the several soft news subjects they covered each week, they had to rely to a large extent on the public relations material that accompanied guests and films. Press releases naturally accentuated the positive, and this emphasis was often carried over into the stories. Moreover, since many of the guests appeared in order to encourage viewers to buy particular products or attend particular events, their press releases tended to emphasize the benefits of the products or events for the individual. At the same time, they avoided the occasionally attendant government-related or business-related controversies.

The same approach was also implicit in the more elaborate press kits that public relations personnel sent to the two interview shows. The kits often suggested sample areas or questions that might be broached on television. In fact, Frank Olam and the host of “Your Show” (who was also the station’s associate news director) routinely used these questions to guide the directions of their interviews, usually in the guest’s desired (uncontroversial) direction.

² Actually, since the “PM” sequences were all created by local stations in the cooperative, it is quite likely (if these findings are generalizable) that those spots were influenced by public relations firms much as were the stories created by the “PM” outlet in this study.

One example was the visit by a representative of the Diamond Information Center to show off a collection of large diamond rings and bracelets. The press kit (and the on-air discussion) emphasized the beauty of diamonds as part of a woman's total look. What the kit did not mention was the connection of those diamonds and the public relations tour to the political and economic struggles of a major South African-based company, De Beers Consolidated Mines. De Beers, the diamond monopoly, was worried about the rapid decline in diamond prices around the world and moving in several ways to shore up the gem's value (6). The talk show's discussion might have centered on efforts by the Diamond Information Center (controlled by De Beers) to help improve diamond sales in the U.S. But the press kit did not mention this controversial side of the public relations tour, and the talk show host (questioned later) revealed ignorance of the "hard news" issue.

Controversy in the programs was avoided for other reasons as well. "PM Magazine" personnel noted that their goal for the program was to be positive and friendly and that controversy simply did not fit into the program's approach. The host of "Your Show" volunteered that he felt it very important to be polite to guests and not to antagonize them, both as a matter of friendliness and in order to maintain the important public relations contacts who were supplying him with interesting program material. He contended that only if his program had the national exposure of a "Phil Donahue Show" or a "20/20" would many public relations practitioners allow clients on it to face pointed questioning.

Over the course of my investigation, the only argument about the implications of a soft news story arose not among the people in front of the camera but among the staff during the production of a regular spot. Both the public relations director of the Child Welfare Bureau and the "Noon News" investigative reporter admitted to differences of opinion over whether "Thursday's Child" should point out the parental neglect and abuse that often bring about the emotional and physical retardation of some of the children they highlight. The public relations director was afraid that such revelations might embarrass the biological relatives of these children and make it harder to get permission from local child welfare officials to present the children for adoption on television. The reporter, who himself had adopted children, felt a moral commitment to making the public aware of child abuse and its consequences. They reached an unsteady truce, with the reporter tacitly agreeing to mention the child abuse problem only once in a while, without emphasis.

Generally, then, the people who worked on the four programs studied handled soft news stories similarly. If there was a difference in handling between "The Noon News" and "Your Show," on the one hand, and "PM Magazine" and "The Frank Olam Show," on the other, it was in the slight sense of guilt that the people from the news departments expressed about even getting involved with packaged hint spots

and public relations agencies. This “guilt” seemed to further encourage their distinction between soft news and the “real,” “straight,” hard news. To them, holding soft news at arm’s length from “the real thing” meant that soft news did not have to conform to all the rules of hard news coverage. For example, it meant that feature stories could be written and produced by people who were not news department employees and that contentions by public relations practitioners did not have to be “balanced” by opposing points of view. In short, the guilt encouraged the journalists to justify the organizational routines that led all four programs to portray the world of the arts and of ordinary people in a consistent manner: as upbeat and interesting, but at the same time as fragmented and having little relationship to issues and structures of ultimate political and economic power.

The presentation of reality in this way might well be an efficient way to attract large audiences. But consistent separation of hard news worlds from soft news worlds may discourage audiences from the kind of critical thinking about system-wide causes and many-leveled explanations that is essential to an understanding of the complex currents of modern society.

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