



Cover Story: Red Stations, Blue Stations

Local TV takes a page from the O'Reilly-Olbermann cable news universe in a bid to stay relevant

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President Obama's plan to overhaul health care dominates our national debate, and provides considerable fodder for the outsize TV personalities who opine on politics for a living. One TV pundit took aim at Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi recently for criticizing those who oppose health-care reform.

“If the Speaker thinks that getting loud and argumentative about your government spending a trillion dollars for what may end up to be socialized health care is somehow 'un-American,’” he told viewers, “then she must also believe that those guys dressed up as Indians at the Boston Tea Party were nothing more than spoiled sports.”

The digs at the Obama administration and Democratic leadership, and the use of politically loaded references to socialism and tea parties, may strike some as being straight out of the Fox News Channel playbook. In fact, the screed was uttered on local broadcast television, as WOIO Cleveland VP/General Manager Bill Applegate used his twice-weekly editorial slot to share his views.

Applegate promotes lively point-of-view not only in editorials, but in the Raycom-owned CBS affiliate's newscasts, too. While traditional journalists may scoff at this departure from the nothing-but-the-facts approach they grew up on, Applegate believes there's nothing wrong with rethinking the news model. “It's hard to look at the decline in news audience and not think they're bored by the product,” he says. “Maybe we should put a little vigor back in the news—have something to say instead of being so damned objective all the time.”

With the traditional model knocked on its rear, and a generation who grew up amidst the cacophony of cable news and talk radio coming of news-viewing age, many station executives around the country see merit in exploring whether the provocative nature of those media might work on their air. Some see a sobering lesson in Fox News Channel (FNC) and MSNBC surging on the backs of primetime partisan pundits while CNN continues to play it down the middle—and lose ground on the competition.

“I think it's something stations need to look at,” says a major-market general manager who asked not to be named for fear of irking the station group's bosses. “It does concern me that if you cover straight news, you will lose.”

Granted, cable news and local television news are vastly different animals, and stations don't have much airtime to let commentators bloviate. A station's take on a national issue such as health-care reform is typically centered on the regional angle, with lawmakers representing the area offering local perspective. “On cable, you go to find people who agree with you,” says WJLA Washington, D.C., Station Manager/VP of News Bill Lord. “In local TV, you go to get objective local news.”

Moreover, broadcast television is regulated by the FCC, while cable is not. Several general managers expressed concern about running afoul of the FCC by offering commentary that shades red or blue, though an FCC spokesperson suggests stations have a wide berth, stating that the FCC cannot require that a station's political speech be balanced.

While political fervor is difficult to quantify, few would argue that the U.S. seems to be more politically polarized each day, with boldface names like MSNBC's Keith Olbermann and FNC's Bill O'Reilly stoking the red-blue battle. Around the same time FNC host Glenn Beck was sticking his tongue out at detractors on the cover of Time, Fox News Sunday host Chris Wallace called President Obama's aides “the biggest bunch of crybabies” after the president snubbed Fox on his multi-network Sunday morning TV tour Sept. 20.

Beyond 'just the facts'

Kate Loor, VP at Magid Communication Strategy, is hearing a growing chorus of stations of all market sizes and places in the pecking order looking to augment local programming with “a point of view or attitude,” she says. Station chiefs cite the likes of Beck and CNN's Anderson Cooper as the model for what Loor dubs “pundit shows,” and use the word “edgy” to describe the content. “Several have expressed a desire to expand local programming, but perhaps not do another newscast,” she says. “General managers are wondering, what can we do that's not so 'journalism—just the facts? How can we do things differently?”

On-air editorials are one option for playing up point-of-view. With newspapers hemorrhaging audience and revenue, some believe GM editorials—marked as commentary, vetted by an editorial board—would give the station some of the POV punch formerly found on newspapers' editorial pages. Few stations outside of Raycom and Hearst air them, and some see opportunity. “I'd love to see somebody in broadcast step up and do that,” says Belo Corp. Senior Advisor Jack Sander. “I don't think we can leave that just to newspapers and bloggers.”

Despite the success of the boisterous pundit shows on cable, most station executives remain squeamish about adding potentially polarizing content to their news mix. Lord

says it's a lose-lose proposition for local TV. "I'm philosophically opposed to that," he says, "and I think local news viewers are opposed to it, too."

Indeed, station news leaning right or left risks a backlash from viewers. "Stations are so much closer to the audience than the networks," says RTNDA Chairman/KOMU Columbia, Mo., News Director Stacey Woelfel. "It's so much easier to dismiss viewers on the other side of the country than the ones down the street."

Pressure can come from advertisers as well. Sinclair Broadcast drew the ire of the left years ago for its often-conservative "The Point" editorials, and for its decisions both to prevent its ABC affiliates from airing a Nightline installment that showed names and photos of dead soldiers, and to champion an unflattering documentary about John Kerry prior to the 2004 election. Protestors posted Sinclair advertisers online and urged viewers to contact the companies about pulling their ads. Sinclair did not comment on the boycotts, but multiple sources said some advertisers did yank ads.

While he estimates that more than \$1 billion may be spent in political money this year, TNS Media Intelligence/CMAG President Evan Tracey doesn't think that stations perceived as friendly to one party or the other will see much more cash than their competitors. "There's a lot of talk about micro-targeting spots, but it's really a blunt instrument," he says.

A recent Pew Research Center study suggests that local television may be better off steering clear of messy partisan politics. Cynicism about cable news runs high—just 34% of Republicans view MSNBC favorably, compared with 43% of Democrats who see Fox News that way. But a separate poll shows 44% believe TV stations do the most to uncover local stories—ahead of newspapers (25%) and news Websites (11%). "At a time when the public is taking a very hard look at news organizations, people have positive views of stations," says Pew Associate Director Carroll Doherty.

Nonetheless, stations will give careful consideration to injecting the decades-old local news model with a blast of attitude designed to stoke debate. They might include an ailing No. 4 station throwing a Hail Mary pass, or a market leader seeking a point of differentiation to keep its distance from the pack.

Madison revenue leader WISC airs daily editorials and features point-counterpoint debates in station newscasts. The station hired a former state senate majority leader who'd done jail time for misconduct in office to host segments on the station Website during the 2008 election season, and welcomes journalists to tackle hot issues for a soon-to-launch feature on the Web.

"What we all do is news and weather and sports, so one way a station can distinguish itself is to take a position—you'll get the news, but we'll tell you what we think, too," WISC Executive VP/General Manager David Sanks says. "When you look at the number of voices available, allowing people to put commentary or editorial into reporting is not a bad thing to me."

