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The News Director's Balance of Business and News: An Oral History Exploration of Salt Lake Television News, 1948 - 2008

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The News Director's Balance of Business and News:

An Oral History Exploration of

Salt Lake Television News,

1948 - 2008

AnDrew M. Tyler

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Ed Adams
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Department of Communications

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ABSTRACT

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News directors fill, perhaps, one of the most difficult roles within the drama of the news room. In an environment where objectivity and trust are paramount, and where bias must be kept at an absolute minimum, the news director exists as the arbiter, balancing these journalistic ideals with the necessities for financial survival. This scenario presents a conflict, in which the news director must constantly balance the journalistic obligation to inform the public, with the managerial obligation to generate a profit. In an exploration of this conflict, I interviewed three news directors from KUTV, KSL, and KTVX within the Salt Lake City market, who each face different circumstances, but who each personify the conflict mentioned above. Each of these news directors place the most value on maintaining the quality of their news product, while still remaining conscious of the budget requirements set by corporate ownership.

When push comes to shove, however, each news director interviewed for this study was of the opinion that news has to come first, even if it means going over budget. When addressing higher management in these over-budget situations, all three news directors tended to shift their conversation to the long-term perspective, reassuring their managers that costs (as a percentage) would drop over time, and revenues would increase. The sacrifice of news content for the sake of the budget was rare for all three news directors. Competition is seen as a way to better serve the community, long term, through increased revenue. Credibility is the balancing factor, keeping the business interests in check with the journalistic ideals.

Keywords: television news, news directors, social responsibility, journalism, Salt Lake City, public service broadcasting, market-driven broadcasting

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I want to express my gratitude to my parents for their inspiration, support, and instilling in me a desire and drive for high educational excellence. Their examples of service, charity, and Christ-like love are the stuff of legends.

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Brigham Young University

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The thesis of AnDrew M. Tyler is acceptable in its final form including (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory and ready for submission.

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CHAPTER ONE

PUBLIC SERVICE AND MARKET-DRIVEN BROADCASTING

[Back then] we had a staff of probably six of us and maybe a budget of \$300,000 dollars a year. We...covered the day's events and had a newscast at six and ten. ... Today, we have probably a hundred people in the newsroom, a budget of, I don't know, six, seven million dollars maybe now.¹

-Dick Nourse, KSL Anchor

Local TV news has changed: The way it's gathered, the method of delivery, and the time it takes to deliver have all changed. Television news has come a long way since the early days of shooting film. Our TVs have evolved and so have our newscasts, from black and white single-camera newscasts to over-the-top tabloid broadcasts.

In their early days, television stations produced local newscasts as a public service. It was something broadcasters did to "repay" the federal government for allowing them to use the public airwaves. Staffs were small and news budgets were minimal. Now, television news is gathered and produced much differently than it was in the 1950s and 1960s.

Furthermore, our culture has changed, technology has evolved, and television news has attempted to match the pace. Today, television news is pervasive. Most local television stations dedicate a majority of their staff and nearly a third of their airtime to delivering news. This evolution has happened in every size market, each following its own timeline. Numerous factors have contributed to this industry shift from public service broadcasting to market-driven broadcasting: the affordability of new technologies, changing ownership structures, and even key local events.²

Walter Cronkite, in 1989, gave a speech in which he explained the effect the bottom line was having on journalism then:

With television's competition for people's attention - and hence for the advertising dollar - many more newspapers have tried to compete by becoming more entertaining and reducing their news coverage to barely more information than television itself provides.³

Cronkite further lamented that the airwaves were full of "more words and pictures ... and yet ... we are imparting less information of importance."⁴

The shift in focus to more commercially driven news production did not *replace* the public service ideals that are inherent to journalism. The ideology of public service broadcasting and the reality of market-driven broadcasting have coexisted since the rise of commercial television news in the 1970s. These ideas are not mutually exclusive; a station's news department can be socially responsible *and* successful as a commercial enterprise. Indeed some station managers believe the expression '*you can do well by doing good.*' However, not all corporate owners feel the same. A survey conducted by the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 2001 found that 84 percent of respondents claimed that low morale in newsrooms across America was "due significantly to profits taking priority over good reporting."⁵ Doing well and doing good are two seemingly conflicting tensions that news directors deal with daily.

Public Service Broadcasting

The idea that journalists should be responsible to society had an early beginning. When this country's forefathers amended the constitution to include the freedom of the press, they didn't predicate this freedom on whether or not a publisher promised to perform established

responsibilities. However, the time soon came when publishers themselves started to link their freedom with some form of responsibility, leading them to develop ethical codes of their own.⁶

An early journalistic ethical code, the *Journalist's Creed* by Walter Williams, had been the guiding principle of journalists for nearly a century. Though it had been adapted and rewritten for different professional groups, a main tenet has been that the “supreme test of good journalism is the measure of its public service.”⁷

With adoption of the Radio Act of 1927, the government involved itself early in the broadcast industry. Because of problems with signal interference, the government took upon itself the authority to license and regulate all radio stations. The government validated its regulation of public airwaves by committing stations to broadcast in "public interest, convenience and necessity."⁸ Later, the Communications Act of 1934 created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and is considered the cornerstone for the government's regulation of all forms of mass communication – including television. These acts were the foundation of a trusteeship model of broadcasting. The federal government allows stations to broadcast over public airwaves; in return stations are trusted to broadcast in the public interest.⁹

Most radio and television stations chose to meet this criteria by delivering local news. This decision created an ideal situation for journalists whose own standards dictated they report as a “public service.” At the time it was not something they did to make money; it was a service to the community dictated by their broadcasting licenses. Television news has experienced enormous growth through the latter half of the twentieth century. Along with this growth it has seen an increase in criticisms as well. Critics point out the apparent breakdown of social responsibility and attribute it to the perversion of journalism for profit. In 1968, Senator John

Pastore, along with Nicholas Johnson, a commissioner from the FCC, accused the three major television networks of “competitiveness at the expense of public interest and charged that they fail to cover events affecting economic interests of television and its advertisers.”¹⁰ Both Commissioner Johnson and Senator Pastore expressed their concern that the solution would have to come from the television industry itself, not from the FCC or government regulations.¹¹

The commercial successes of broadcasting and the rise of cable television—with its unlimited capacity for channels—through the early 1980s brought a shift in the way broadcast regulation was viewed. Some argue the trusteeship model has been succeeded by the marketplace model.¹²

Market-Driven Broadcasting

Several major influences contributed to this shift in the broadcast industry. Most notably was the success of the CBS news magazine show, *60 Minutes*. Between 1975 and 1982 advertising rates multiplied over ten times, from \$17,000 to \$175,000, per 30-second spot.¹³ This success did not go unnoticed as station owners around the country followed suit, realizing that broadcast news had the potential to make money. It was during this time that broadcast news generally became more of a product for consumers and less of a service for citizens.¹⁴

During the 1990s John McManus developed a “market-based model of news production,” which examines how market mentality shapes commercial news production.¹⁵ McManus explained that journalists are increasingly affected by market logic; that numerous factors over time have placed local television stations and their journalists in positions where they have to choose between economic logic and pursuing journalistic norms.¹⁶ He and other researchers

have suggested that the media's decisions of what to cover in a newscast are often based on the bottom line.¹⁷ When having to decide between in-depth investigative reporting and a more “economical passive information reception route, local TV journalists tend to take the economical alternative.”¹⁸

Research Purpose

Journalistic values and market logic, though not mutually exclusive, often come to bear on one person within the structure of the newsroom: the news director. News directors are most often in charge of the direction and branding of the news product. Parent companies allocate a budget to station managers who, in turn, assign a budget to their respective news director. Meanwhile, within the daily execution of their jobs, news directors have to decide how they will best serve the public as advocates of journalism, and how they can continue to serve the public in view of the budget they are obliged to maintain.

The purpose of this research is to explore these two concepts as they influence the role of the news director, specifically his or her reality of operating in a market-driven industry with the idealistic concept of a public-serving, socially responsible press. Research of this type is most often addressed on a macro level. This thesis will focus on the micro level: It will examine the role of the news director. Specifically, how do they cope with these differing paradigms? What express choices do they have to make? When do they feel like they've been successful – or failed? This thesis proposes to extend the existing literature on normative and commercially oriented works related to television journalism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public-service broadcasting and market-driven broadcasting, as models, are not mutually exclusive, but for the sake of this literature review they will be separated into individual sections. The theory of social responsibility and perception of news production as a business are the foundational components of this study.

Social Responsibility

The concept of broadcasting in the public's interest aligns with the theory of social responsibility. Social responsibility is a normative theory that holds that any entity, be it government, corporate or individual, has a responsibility to society. It can be interpreted to simply mean that governmental agencies have a responsibility to assure their citizens have civil rights, or that a business is responsible for respecting its employees' human rights. Social responsibility goes further, to declare that these entities have an underlying moral responsibility to give back to society. It is a voluntary action to go above and beyond what laws dictate. It means avoiding corruption, and irresponsible or unethical behavior that could negatively affect the community.¹⁹

The theory of social responsibility, as applied specifically to the press, arises from a number of ideas and reforms developed by many men, such as George Seldes, a one time reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. Early in the twentieth century, Seldes criticized the press for, among other things, not telling the whole story, lacking diversity, abusing power, and its role in the democratic process. The major foundation for the theory of social responsibility as applied to the press in the twentieth century, was established by the Commission on Freedom of the Press—

better known as the Hutchins Commission.²⁰ The founder of *Time Magazine*, Henry Luce, interested to know about the freedom of the press and his obligations as an editor, provided funding to Robert M. Hutchins, then the president of the University of Chicago. Hutchins commissioned a group of scholars to define the freedom and accountability of the press—and what the media’s obligations were to society. The report, published in 1947, claimed the press enjoyed freedom for the purpose of upholding democracy and further explained that a press that failed to uphold its democratic duties would eventually lose its freedom.²¹

The *Hutchins Commission Report* set forth several requirements for a free and responsible press:

1. The media should provide a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context that gives them meaning.
2. The media should serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism.
3. The media should project a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society.
4. The media should present and clarify the goals and values of the society.
5. The media should provide full access to the day's intelligence.²²

The major recommendation of the report was that an independent agency should be established “to appraise and report annually upon the performance of the press,”²³ something the commission thought necessary to keep the press in check. The 137-page report was not well-received by the press. The report chastised the press for being too biased, too easily manipulated by large corporations, and printing sensational or frivolous news.²⁴ Until this time, individual critics of the press had attempted to show the press its shortcomings, but it was the Hutchins Commission’s report that successfully pointed the spotlight of social responsibility on the press.

Television during the 1950s was under even more pressure to serve the public because of its regulation by the federal government. While a major commission has never been formed to explore the issues since the Hutchins Commission Report, many critics have highlighted the

mistakes and shortcomings of broadcast news using the Commission as a foundation. These critics are not alone. Congress has supplied its share of critical inquiries as well. These critics attempt to focus the public's attention on the organizational and operational problems of television news, and the subsequent effects on society.

Media critics, such as Ben Bagdikian, Neil Hickey, Helen Thomas, and John McManus, each have their own argument for why the media are not socially responsible and thereby not able to serve the public. These normative critiques suggest the absence of social responsibility in a majority of the media today.

In the early 1980s, Bagdikian, a former high ranking editor at the *Washington Post* and dean of the University of California at Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, began to point out the problems of consolidations and media mergers. In 1984 Bagdikian published the first edition of his book *The Media Monopoly*, in which he indicated the number of corporations or controlling firms of the media had been pared down to fifty. By the time he published the sixth edition in 2004—renamed *The New Media Monopoly*—the number of controlling firms was down to five. He argued that this conglomeration and ownership concentration is a detriment to society. The less competition there is, he said, the more control these corporations have over the price and quality of the news, and over the public's perception of reality. The more concentrated the ownership of the media, the less likely the media will be serving the public.

Hickey and others have examined the breakdown of what journalists have regarded as a sacred wall between the editorial and advertising functions in newspapers and other media.²⁵ Hickey's research suggests that corporate ownership's demand for higher profit margins places a

television station's "professional soul at risk."²⁶ Thus, as stations and newspapers give in to advertisers and parent companies' demand for higher returns, they lose their credibility.²⁷

Thomas, a longtime member of the White House press corps, has written on what she sees as the devolution of the press' ability to act as a watchdog of the government, especially since September 11, 2001.²⁸ She believes that there has been an ever-widening credibility gap between journalists and the executive branch. She also criticizes modern journalists for acting more like lapdogs than watchdogs, arguing "without an informed people, there can be no democracy."²⁹

These normative critiques suggest that television news is not as socially responsible as it is financially driven.

The Business of News Production

This thesis is strongly informed by McManus and his market-based model of news production. McManus has scrutinized the evolution of television news into a business orientation. His studies have attempted to explain what he considers to be the negative influence market forces have on the delivery of public service news.³⁰ McManus is one of the many scholars who have studied newsroom organization and its effects on news content, as well as the economics of news, both in print and broadcast journalism.

Researchers have built upon each others research since the 1950s, creating a layered model that tries to explain the business of news production. From the early articles in the 1950s, Wilbur Schramm began with the explanation that news production, and the job of a journalist, is to frame the important news of the day.³¹ In 1955, David White added the gatekeeping role of journalists and their unavoidable biases. He explained that news is filtered through a gatekeeper,

a reporter, or an editor deciding what information to pass along to the public.³² Warren Breed's 1955 study suggested a level of social control in the newsroom, adding to the individual level of influence explored by Schramm and White. Breed looked closer at the interests of the entities producing the news. He showed that journalistic norms and economic or business norms often conflict. He looked at how policy, defined by publishers, came to be maintained, or sidestepped, by reporters, or those subordinate.³³ Breed's research suggested a layer of organizational control over news content.

Throughout the next two and a half decades, Walter Gieber, Paul M. Hirsch, Gaye Tuchman and Mark Fishman each explored additional layers of influence and decision-making.³⁴ Collectively, their findings suggested that routines, or the "commonly accepted practices," in the newsrooms were more important in shaping the news than gatekeepers' personalized biases.³⁵ These findings added the third layer of routines to the previous layers of gatekeeping and organizational control. In 1979, Herbert Gans' research suggested a fourth layer of influence: outside sources were competing with each other and with news executives to shift the portrayal of the news to their benefit. Gans looked at all forms of media; television, magazines, and newspapers. His findings suggested that the news media are caught between two strong opposing forces: the consumer and news sources.³⁶ This research added a level of extramedia influence. A fifth level was explored by researchers J. Herbert Altschull, Edward Herman, and Noam Chomsky. They explained news production as an ideological domination of society by elites, where those in power control the news and shape it to maintain their position of power, while convincing the non-elites to accept a subordinate position.³⁷

In 1991, Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese pooled these early ideas and layers into a “hierarchy of influences model.”³⁸ Their model showed the aforementioned five levels—individual, media routines, organizational, extramedia and ideological level—as concentric rings, but did not go far enough to explain the interaction between the levels. In 1992, Joseph Turow redefined the five levels of influence into thirteen more specific “power roles” in news production.³⁹ These roles included internal positions like corporate executives, producers, and reporters, as well as external roles like that of news sources, revenue sources, consumers, and investors. Turow’s findings suggested the “typical activities” of each role and how they leveraged one another, but did not fully explore how the roles work in concert as a whole.⁴⁰

These studies and models serve as a starting point for McManus’ market-based model of news production. To create this model, McManus studied several different stations, watching their inner-newsroom decision-making process and observing their story selection process. In an effort to understand the increasing economic rationalism in journalism, he found that “news fails to meet the minimum conditions economists have established as necessary for markets to benefit society.”⁴¹ With this research, he combined these background models into a complex theory of interactions. His model looks at how market mentality shapes commercial news production. Many researchers have pointed out the interaction between news departments and news consumers. McManus takes it a step further to dissect the interactions at every level to explain each transaction as a market-based decision. He explains that the news is, now more than ever, defined as a “market;” a place to buy and sell goods.⁴² This is not only a transaction between news departments and news consumers, but between outside sources and news departments; the exchange between parent companies and media firms, between public investors and parent

companies. Each of these transactions are market-based, trading something of value, be it money, content or attention.⁴³

The market-based model argues that principal news decisions in a news department are complicated. “The owner’s instructions, which take into account the profit demand from the market for investors, are channeled through corporate headquarters, where they become more specific, and then are passed on to media firm management.”⁴⁴ From there, being led by an “organizational culture” which merges principles of journalism and business, stations engage in competition with other stations to interact with sources, sign contracts with advertisers, and negotiate time with news consumers. Thus, television news “becomes a commodity shaped by a collection of markets, an elaborate compromise.”⁴⁵

The need to satisfy investors has led stations to develop a more tantalizing newscast. Many have sacrificed political content and in-depth reporting for soft news and entertaining stories.⁴⁶ They pander to the public’s baser instincts because they need to make money to satisfy their investors.⁴⁷ The interest of the few is holding hostage what is in the best interest of society. The shareholders’ demand for a greater return on investment has tied the hands of those who would be pure journalists.⁴⁸ If the press were acting in a socially responsible manner, we would be seeing more educated public discussions and balanced debates about ideas and issues.⁴⁹

Parallel to these landmark studies of general broadcasting, a major ethnographic study in the late 1980s explored the way news production was affected by a television station’s perception of its audience. Margaret Knutson spent years gathering interviews and observing operations within Salt Lake City television station KUTV. Knutson explored the concept of “audience” in the KUTV newsroom and found that news workers talked about their audience and that such talk

affected the organization of the newsroom. She also concluded that the way in which news workers conceptualize the audience helps them to balance the ideals of their journalistic professions and the “economic demands of the organization.”⁵⁰

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The conflict between a socially responsible press and a market-driven industry is not new. As early as 1955, Breed’s study of social control in the newsroom suggested that journalistic norms and business goals are often in conflict. Since the early 1980s, market-driven broadcasting and public service broadcasting have been driving forces in the production of news.

While much has been written on the perversion of journalism for profit, less has been written about the individuals who make the daily editorial decisions in the television newsrooms. This thesis concentrates on how individual television news directors address this conflict. How do they cope? How do broadcast news directors deal with the immediacy of news and the long-term constraints of corporate budgets?

This thesis examines the stories, thoughts, and feelings of news directors who have experienced this internal struggle of balance on a personal level. Their answers show us times when news takes precedence over their budgets and when their budgets are affected by the public service of journalism. Their answers also provide clues to whether individual news directors handle this clash of ideals differently.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis relies upon oral history interviews to answer these questions. Advocates for oral history, such as Bonnie Brennen and Paul Thompson, explain that “A more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past” can be obtained through the use of oral histories.⁵¹ Hearing the personal experiences of ordinary people, according to Brennen, helps to create a “richer, more vivid and heartrending recreation of history.”⁵² Brennen also suggests that most often it is the journalism elites, publishers, and owners, that have been the sources of oral history interviews for journalism research, which perpetuates the “ideological dominant perspective.”⁵³ Interviews of the rank and file in the newsroom are seldom heard.

McManus, Hickey, Siebert, and others have researched and studied journalism’s shift in focus. Using ethnography, survey, historical, and other methods, researchers have published articles and books on their findings. However, there is a gap when it comes to hearing the voices of those who experience the challenge of balancing the two ideals first hand. One could look at the news content, and how it has evolved, or look strictly at the numbers to see the changes in a market—a change that is mirrored across the nation. However, oral histories give us the experiences and insights to more precisely explore the daily balancing act of the news director. These stories and interviews can help us understand how news directors deal with the conflict of broadcasting in the public’s interest and broadcasting for profit.

To accomplish this research, open-ended interviews were conducted with three news directors in Salt Lake City: Tanya Veal (KUTV), Con Psarras (KSL), and Patrick Benedict (KTVX). The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed. Each interview was loosely structured around three topic areas: (1) the television station’s current ownership status, (2)

personal experiences with balancing budgets and journalism, and (3) the transformation of television news. This thesis draws from these interviews as well as from additional interviews of Salt Lake City broadcasters held by The Everett L. Cooley Oral History Project and housed at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

The Salt Lake City television market encompasses nearly one million television households, which makes it the thirty-third largest in the nation in size, according to Nielsen Media.⁵⁴ Similar sized markets are Columbus, Ohio, and Kansas City, Missouri. Salt Lake City also provides an interesting and potentially informative mix of ownership situations. Specifically, there is one station that has always been owned by the same local entity that operates within the same building; another was family owned for most of its six decades on air, then sold to a national company; and a third has been owned by a distant corporation almost since its first broadcast.

This market also has a representative mix of news directors: one who is a seasoned veteran of news - both print and broadcast; another who worked through the producing ranks of her newsroom to become a news director at a young age; and a third who found himself as an interim news director between ownerships. The circumstances in which these news directors find themselves are typical in the television news industry and can be thought of as representative of many news directors throughout the country in similar circumstances. In other words, these three can easily serve as archetypical news directors.

This unique combination of ownership situations occurring in a single market, along with the archetypes of the respective news directors, makes a study of Salt Lake City potentially

informative. The Salt Lake market was also chosen for its convenience, as the author has access to current news directors and historical records.

LIMITATIONS

As with any study based on oral histories, this study is not without its limitations. This study is not generalizable to other television markets, or other time periods. There are many unique aspects to this study that make it difficult to generalize any findings beyond the market and time period in which it was conducted; the ownership situations, the economic situation during the time of the study, and the inherent biases that exist in the oral history interview methodology. These limitations are discussed in more depth in the conclusion chapter of this thesis.

PROPOSED OUTLINE

This thesis is organized in the following manner:

Chapter Two provides a background on the history of Salt Lake City's television news stations, examining the growth and ownership structures of each.

Chapter Three deals with the shift from public service broadcasting to market-driven broadcasting as it specifically occurred in the Salt Lake City television market. This chapter relies upon oral history interviews conducted by the author, as well as interviews held by The Everett L. Cooley Oral History Project, to provide the stories of those pioneers that experienced the evolution first hand.

Chapter Four introduces the three Salt Lake City news directors as archetypes and provides a short biography for each one.

Chapter Five discusses the findings from the interviews conducted. It examines the similarities and differences in each news directors' approach, and shares examples of times when news judgement was affected by budget and vice-versa.

Chapter Six provides conclusions and suggests further avenues for inquiry, such as: What do these findings mean for the future of Salt Lake City news? Is there anything to learn that will benefit the news industry as it approaches a new era? This chapter will also address limitations of this study.

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CHAPTER TWO

BACKGROUND OF SALT LAKE CITY'S TELEVISION STATIONS

Salt Lake City's story of station ownership is one of affiliate swapping and call letter shuffling. Active in television broadcasting since 1948, Salt Lake City has a rich broadcast history. The inventor of the first electronic television, Philo T. Farnsworth, was a Utahn. When RCA introduced television at the 1939 World Fair, Salt Lake City was one of a handful of cities to have a local display of new television technology.¹

Each of Salt Lake's television stations have their own story and past. As this paper aims to explore the shift in the television industry from public service broadcasting to market-driven broadcasting, it would be best served by a brief examination of the growth and ownership structures of each station.

KTVX – Channel 4 (ABC)

KTVX Channel 4 is the oldest television station in the Salt Lake market. It currently resides in a building it shares with the CW affiliate to the west of Salt Lake City. KTVX has weathered numerous ownership changes, having seen days under Time Inc., Screen Gems Broadcasting, United Broadcasting (which then merged with Chris-Craft Industries), Clear Channel and now Providence Equity Partners.

KTVX began its broadcast life alongside KDYL radio in the mid 1940s. KDYL received an experimental television license (KDYL-W6XIS) in 1948. It was the first independently owned television station to sign on in America, broadcasting with 100 watts from the Walker

Bank Building at 175 S. Main Street in downtown Salt Lake City. KDYL-W6XIS was owned and operated by Sid Fox, a radio station owner and promoter. Fox used his radio and television station to promote and advertise numerous businesses and events in Salt Lake City.² Life as an independent station lasted only five years. KDYL changed its call letters to KTVT in 1953 when it was sold to TLF Broadcasting, a subsidiary of Time Inc.³ The station changed call letters again to KCPX when it was bought by Screen Gems Broadcasting in 1959. Finally it became KTVX in 1975, with the sale of the station to United Television, the broadcasting division of 20th Century Fox. In 1981, United Television merged with Chris-Craft Industries, a boat manufacturing company with a broad business portfolio based in Sarasota, Florida.⁴ In 2001, all of Chris-Craft's stations were bought by News Corporation's Fox Television Stations. Another station in Salt Lake City, KSTU, was already owned by Fox, so KTVX was traded to Clear Channel.⁵ KTVX was owned by Clear Channel from 2001 to 2007, when it agreed to sell all the stations in its television group to Providence Equity Partner's Newport Television.⁶

Thus, since beginning regular broadcasts in 1948, KTVX was independently owned for five years, corporately owned for more than five decades, and is currently owned by a private equity firm.

It took more than a year to complete the latest sale from Clear Channel to Providence Equity Partners. Early in this process, the news director was fired and assistant news director Patrick Benedict received what he called his "battlefield commission,"⁷ acquiring the responsibilities and duties of an interim news director.

KSL – Channel 5 (NBC)

KSL-TV began broadcasting in June of 1949.⁸ The ownership of KSL is as simple as the ownership history of KTVX is complex. When it went on air in 1949, KSL was considered a division of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint's (LDS) church-owned newspaper, the *Deseret News*. Ownership formally shifted in 1964, with the formation of Bonneville International Corporation, a division of the LDS Church. Today KSL is still owned by Bonneville International, which resides under the wing of the Deseret Management Corporation, which, in turn, acts at the direction of the LDS Church.⁹ KSL has ultimately been owned and managed by a single entity for its entire broadcast life of six decades. Since the 1970s, KSL has been the top-rated television station in the Salt Lake market. In 1995, KSL swapped network affiliation with KUTV from CBS to NBC.¹⁰

KUTV – Channel 2 (CBS)

KUTV signed on the air in 1954 as an ABC affiliate, trading networks with KCPX-TV in 1960 to become an NBC affiliate. KUTV was owned by the Hatch Family from 1954 until 1994. While KUTV has had several owners in the recent past, not much has changed in the newsroom. For the most part, the changes were in name only. The major change in ownership was in 1994, when NBC bought majority control. A complex deal in the fall of 1995 left the station owned by Westinghouse Broadcasting (Group W), which in turn merged in 1996 with CBS. This ownership shuffle changed the station's affiliation from NBC to CBS, making it one of the few stations in the nation to have been affiliated with all three networks. CBS owned KUTV from 1996 until 2008, though there was a formal name shift in 1999 when CBS was acquired by

Viacom. The companies, CBS and Viacom, separated again in 2006. The biggest ownership change came early in 2008 when, after a year-long deal, ownership transferred to a private equity group, Cerberus Capital Management. This marked the first time in the station's 55 years that its parent company's core business was not television.

Summary

The Salt Lake City television market has an informative blend of station ownership situations, as it contains television stations with distinct, yet typical, ownership arrangements: a station that has been corporately owned and operated for more than 90 percent of its broadcasting life, another station that was a family-owned business until 15 years ago, and a third station that has had only one local owner throughout its entire existence.

Chapter Three examines the shift from public service broadcasting to market-driven broadcasting as it occurred in the Salt Lake City market. This shift will be presented by focusing on local events, national events, and technological advances that affected the market as a whole. Discussion will also be given to the influence of ownership on each the stations in the market.

NOTES

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CHAPTER THREE

THE BIRTH OF TELEVISION NEWS IN SALT LAKE CITY

This chapter explores the shift from public service broadcasting to market-driven broadcasting as it happened in the Salt Lake City television market. This chapter will rely upon oral history interviews and The Everett L. Cooley Oral History Project to provide the stories of those pioneers that experienced this evolution first hand.

In the early days of television, the FCC mandated that radio and television stations needed to broadcast in the public's interest, specifically serving their communities. It was assumed that the airwaves were public property and stations licensed by the federal government should be required to produce programming that would benefit and serve the public. To fulfill this responsibility, some television station owners hollowed out small areas in their stations and created news teams. Between the years of 1957 and 1987, Jackie Nokes was a television host, producer, and eventually assistant to the president at KSL. She recalls the early days of news at the station. In an oral history interview conducted in 1986 by Timothy Larson, she described what news was like in 1959 at KSL:

When I started at KSL, we had two people in the news department. We hired someone to read the news, we had a staff announcer to do the weather, and I think a staff announcer to do the sports. But we had a reporter and a photographer.¹

Nokes saw the news as the price a station paid for having a license. She also notes that 25 years later, in 1986, the public *expected* a news department to produce fifty percent of a station's profits.²

Dick Nourse, anchor for KSL for forty-three years, remembers the state of things when he started in 1965, and how things have changed since then.

We had a staff of probably six of us and maybe a budget of 300,000 dollars a year. And, we, all six of us, covered the day's events and had a newscast at six and ten. ... To where today (2007), we have probably a hundred people in the newsroom, a budget of, I don't know, six, seven million dollars maybe now.³

During these early years, television news was so new to Salt Lake City that some new hires didn't even know what they were supposed to do. Bob Welti, who had some weather training as a pilot in the navy, volunteered to be the first weatherman on Channel 4 (now KTVX) in the early 60s. The program director said, "Okay, you're a TV weatherman." Welti asked, "What does a TV weatherman do?" The director replied, "I don't know, you're the weatherman, you figure it out."⁴

Those who were part of these fledgling news teams were there for the love of journalism. Craig Wirth, a reporter from 1970–2002, says he chose to be a journalist because he loved to write and loved to take pictures, and loved to put words and pictures together: "I loved to present a message I hoped was truthful."⁵ Wirth recalls they had no supervision, no one to tell them what to cover or how to cover it. No one told them what length a story needed to be. All they knew was that they had no budget.⁶ He explained in those days they had meetings to discuss what they would be covering, but it wasn't an agenda. "It wasn't something that said we're going to go out and cover and make the town a better place. I think we all tried to, but there wasn't that purposeful agenda. I think we were all proud of what we did."⁷ Though they were proud of their work and happy to be journalists, Wirth points out they were considered the mavericks of the station; they were given the worst desks and tucked away in "little cubby holes."

We were not producing revenue for the station, at any of the stations. Channel 2 had gone through at one point a two-person news staff. Channel 5 probably had ten. You know, we were not a money making place, and we were not money-making people.⁸

Harold Woolley, general manager of Channel 4 KCPX (later KTVX) in the late 1960s points out the importance of the news department for a station, and the strain that eventually came from keeping up with the other stations.

The station's image in the market is largely responsible as to what their news is like. And it's enormously expensive, very complicated, and you're dealing with all sorts of forces that make it tough. It got increasingly difficult here because of the various commitments that were made across the street. George Hatch (owner, KUTV) was one never to let up, and he put in a lot of bucks into the thing.⁹

How Local Events Changed Salt Lake News

Woolley adds when he took over as General Manager in 1964, the idea of news was already established. He says one particular incident, a riot at the Utah State Prison at Point of the Mountain that year, had quite an impact on the future of television news. For Woolley it was the "most singular news event in the early days of television."¹⁰ The experience created an awareness for the viewers as well as the newsmakers. The prisoners involved said that they wouldn't talk unless it was on television. That's when Woolley saw television news as "an interesting way to make money,"¹¹ and soon found out that it was expensive, too.

In remembering the big local stories that contributed to the Salt Lake market's shift of focus, Wirth recalls that disasters, and things that needed immediate attention, were the key stories that attracted viewers. Specific stories that he calls "water cooler-type talk" were the murderous spree of Ted Bundy (1974) and the Teton Dam disaster in Idaho (1976).¹² These were

events that “needed momentary updates.”¹³ When public interest programming started to produce viewers because of these major local stories, owners of the stations realized the burden mandated by the FCC was becoming a boon.

It was also around that time that President Spencer W. Kimball, of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, extended the church’s priesthood to all worthy Latter-day Saint males, thus lifting the ban on black members holding the priesthood. By “the time that announcement was made, the morning paper had been out, the *Deseret News* had [also] been out, it was an evening paper,”¹⁴ so it was on the ten o’clock news first. It was something the “whole town was talking about.”¹⁵

How National Events Changed Salt Lake News

Other Salt Lake broadcasters partially credit national influences for the growing popularity of news. Nourse recalls the 1960s as a time of change for the nation, “with a presidential assassination, civil unrest, and an unpopular war, people wanted news fast.” They looked toward television news to learn about these events as they happened.¹⁶

The Vietnam War was an important news story on the national level that brought viewers to the new medium of television. Some news departments were able to send their own anchors/reporters to the conflict to report firsthand. KSL sent Nourse, which allowed it to bring a national event closer to home. Nourse interviewed soldiers from Utah and brought their stories home to broadcast on the local news.¹⁷

According to Wirth, a few years later another major event changed television nationally and locally: Watergate. Wirth explained that the Watergate scandal was broken by newspaper reporters at the *Washington Post*, but most people watched the Watergate hearings on television.

The residual effect was for all of television news. First at the network level and then at the local level... The difference between '72 and '73 and '72 and '71 is phenomenal. Locally, even. Suddenly, television news was big money, was big business, and became a revenue center for television stations. Not only just in Salt Lake, but nationally.¹⁸

How Technology Changed Salt Lake News

Not only did major local and national events and disasters usher in a new era of television news, technology also played a role in the Salt Lake newsrooms' shift toward market-driven journalism.

Several advances in technology made news production easier and allowed local stations to get closer to the community, by allowing stations to respond faster to newsworthy situations. One change on the national level was the industry move from gathering news on film—which had to be processed and developed before each newscast—to shooting on tape. This technical development decreased the time required to get video of a story on the air. It also gave the stations a chance to cover a broader area, because camera gear was more portable. Jack Goodman, news director during the early 1960s at Channel 4, remembers another simple bit of technology that had an effect on the newsroom and television news: the police scanner:

Everybody, at least in the front office, wanted visuals to go with the news. It was partly an outgrowth of the newsreel concept and partly an outgrowth of the fact that it could be done. And people wanted to see what had happened, and then they wanted to see it while it was happening. See it visually. So that really changed the name of the game...¹⁹

Then there was the arrival of color cameras. George Hatch explained that KSL, being owned ultimately by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was able to buy cameras sooner than he would have liked to have purchased them for his own station. He wanted to maintain a quality news operation, so he tried to keep up with KSL when it came to technologies, sometimes acquiring things before KSL did and sometimes afterward.²⁰

It went a little faster than we would have preferred, but it made for good quality television. Because you often were forced to move to compete quicker than you might have wanted to. This market evolved much faster than most its size.

Harold Woolley noticed that budget constraints imposed by a distant owner kept Channel 4 from upgrading as competitively as the other two stations. He admits they were limited in resources due to their ownership situation.²¹

We didn't really have a commitment to news. And in a way it's probably [just as] well, because with KSL with the resources that they had, and George [Hatch, KUTV] and his pumping into it, he could because he owned the thing. So we were somewhat critically limited in resources, that is, in terms of cameras, tape recorders, and all the stuff it takes to be competitive, remote riggs(sic). We never did get a helicopter and all that.²²

However, George Hatch (KUTV) supposed that Channel 4's (KTVX) position of being owned by a larger corporation gave them a slight advantage when it came to making a profit as a station.

They [KTVX] were owned by a film company that primarily assigned to them, sending a check for a certain amount each month to support the parent company operation. Whatever they did, they had to mail that check. As a result they have been very profit-minded. I am sure that many times they have made more than we or KSL because they had a small news operation with game shows at six while we were carrying the news. It is a profitable way to succeed.²³

In other words, Hatch observed that KTVX was obligated to send money to its parent company regardless of its ratings or advertising revenues. Thus, the choices they made, like airing a syndicated game-show instead of producing a six o'clock newscast, were heavily influenced by the bottom line.

Even in the early days KSL weatherman Bob Welti was fully aware of his station management's position on the news as a money maker, and it didn't bother him.

Any private enterprise like TV, which thank goodness it is, the basic purpose was to make money. And they discovered after they'd been on the air a short period of time, that the news was very desirable for spots because that's where the ratings [were], mostly.²⁴

The thing that mattered to management says Welti was "the quality of the news, weather and sports but only in that it created an audience."²⁵ Welti also explains some of the reasoning behind larger technologies like adding a helicopter to the news gathering process.

They just said "Hey, can we get better ratings with a helicopter? What does a helicopter cost? Holy mackerel! We've got to get some ratings for that helicopter." But they stuck their necks out and got that helicopter, and by george, people liked it and more people would watch and the ratings would go up, and they could charge more for their commercials.²⁶

How Ownership Changed Salt Lake News

Like Welti, Wirth realized early on that stations exist to make money, but he points out that local station owners like George Hatch of KUTV balanced the business aspect with a focus on public service broadcasting. Hatch had an interest in the community, and the state of Utah.²⁷

There was a sense, even though it was a money-making business for George Hatch, [that] it was also his. He treated it as a treasure, a gift, to do stories, to enlighten, to entertain—entertain in a way [as to] inform Salt Lake and Utah, his beloved Utah, with his KUTV. KSL [did] the same thing.

Channel 4 was owned nationally, [and] didn't experience that. [For Hatch,] it was a chance to empower the state.²⁸

Wirth was not the only one to laud Hatch's public service; many others still remember Hatch's ownership of KUTV as a time when focusing on local news was still worthwhile, even if not profitable. Mike Youngren, news director of KUTV from 1982–1988, lamented the absence of local documentaries and stories after ownership changed from the Hatch family to NBC during the 1990s.²⁹ “George Hatch...believed each subject was important. [He] believed that [his] TV station had a duty to present the information.”³⁰ On George Hatch's influence as a local television station owner, reporter and producer Larry Warren adds:

In those early days, KUTV was a really unique place. [Hatch] was a broadcaster who was here to serve our community. He was public spirited, and was a strong pull for me to stay. He believed in allowing us to take the time to go where we needed to go and get the story right. It was fantastic journalism, and in the years Hatch ran the station, it was a magical place.³¹

The transition to a market-driven product didn't take long. From the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, a few advancements in electronics, major news stories involving the nation, and several key stories here in Salt Lake City propelled television news from being a money pit to being a money tree.

Station owners quickly saw that news consumers were eager to watch the daily events on the nightly news. They tuned in to see what was happening near to them and to find out what issues might affect them. Journalists saw a chance to inform the public, to educate them, and provide a public service. These owners who were locally based, believed that public service was a chance to give back to the community, an opportunity to shed some light on matters that were close to them. Being community-minded and having a voice in the community allowed them to make statements on local and statewide issues. They had an audience that was ready to hear

what they had to say. While that could be used to skew the public's perception of reality or to cover up scandals or "rough spots," local owners in the Salt Lake market were respected for their choices and the juxtaposition of journalistic and economic norms.

Summary

New technologies, disasters, local stories and national stories all helped boost the business side of Salt Lake's television news. However, it was the local ownership of two of the stations that found, for a time, a balance between business norms and journalism norms. As local owners invested in their stations, they invested in their community. Each station experienced its own path as it transitioned to a market mentality, but it was the local ownership of KSL and KUTV that allowed journalists to be journalists even while the news departments themselves grew into market-driven operations.

NOTES

1 Jackie Nokes, interview by Tim Larson, 10 June 1986. Tape U-475 transcript, Everett L. Cooley Oral History Project Collection, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Ut., 10,11.

2. Nokes, Interview, p 10-11.

[Jackie] When I started at KSL, we had two people in the news department. We hired someone to read the news, we had a staff announcer to do the weather, and I think a staff announcer to do the sports. But we had a reporter and a photographer ...

[Interviewer] The news --as you well know, news used to be the price you'd pay for your license.

[Jackie] That's right.

[Interviewer] As a public service. Now it's 50 percent of your revenue.

[Jackie] It sure is. That's what people expect from us now.

3. Richard (Dick) Nourse, interview by author, video recording, Salt Lake City, Utah, 21 November 2007, page 1, lines 7-13.

4. Robert (Bob) Welti, interview by author, video recording, Cottonwood Heights, Utah, 24 October 2007.

5. Craig Wirth, interview by author, video recording, Salt Lake City, Utah, 24 October 2007, page 2, line 1.

6. Wirth, interview, page 2, line 6.

7. Wirth, interview, page 2, line 14.

8. Wirth, interview, page 2, line 18-21.

9. Harold (hack) Woolley, interviewed by Tim Larson, September 9, 1986. Tape 550 transcript, Everett L. Cooley Oral History Project Collection, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Ut. 23.

10. Woolley, interview, 24.

11. Woolley, interview, 25.

12. Wirth, interview, page 7, line 7.

13. Wirth, interview, page 7, line 10.

14. Wirth, interview, page 7, lines 1-2.

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16. KSL, "Eyewitness to 50 Years: A Journey of Change," (webpage) accessed Nov 26th from <http://web.ksl.com/TV/content/50th/p-sub10.htm>

17. Nourse, interview, page 2, lines 6-10.

18. Wirth, interview, page 3, lines 11-15.

19. Jack Goodman, interviewed by Tim Larson and Roy Gibson, July 28, 1986. Tapes 513-516 transcript, Everett L. Cooley Oral History Project Collection, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Ut. 95.
20. George Hatch, interviewed by Tim Larson, March 14, 1990. Tape U-1204 transcript, Everett L. Cooley Oral History Project Collection, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Ut. 22.
21. Woolley, interview, 25.
22. Woolley, interview, 25.
23. Hatch, interview, 22.
24. Welte, interview, page 2, lines 7-10.
25. Welte, interview, page 2, lines 14-15.
26. Welte, interview, page 2, lines 18-22.
27. Wirth, interview, page 14.
28. Wirth, interview, page 14, lines 11-15.
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30. Youngren, Utah's Newscasts, B5.
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CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEWS DIRECTORS

News directors fill, perhaps, one of the most difficult roles within the news room. In an environment where objectivity and trust are necessary, and where bias must be kept at an absolute minimum, the news director exists as the arbiter, balancing these journalistic ideals with the necessities for financial survival. This scenario presents a conflict, where the news director must constantly balance the news department's social obligation to inform the public with the managerial directive to generate profit. This chapter introduces the three news directors in the Salt Lake City market, provides a short biography for each one, and demonstrates how they are typical of news directors nationally.

In exploring how news directors balance their journalistic ideals in the midst of a market or business orientation, it was quickly apparent that each station has its own system in place for balancing the sales and news departments. Each station employs a checks and balances system that allows the station to grow as a business, while still allowing the news department to produce a product that can serve the community.

News directors are faced with the challenge of pursuing news that will serve the public within the budget they've been allotted. In this, the individual news directors' responsibilities are similar. However, at times they approach their roles differently. Each news director highlighted in this research has a different ownership situation and a different background in news. This section will begin by profiling the youngest of the news directors, KUTV's Tanya Veal, followed by KSL's Con Psarras, a seasoned veteran of both print and broadcast news, and

finally, Patrick Benedict, who found himself holding the reins of KTVX after lengthy sales negotiations left the station without a news director.

Tanya Vea: KUTV's Skilled Novice

Half of the bottom floor of the Wells Fargo building in downtown Salt Lake City houses KUTV. The news desk from which the anchors deliver the news sits in front of large windows which face Main Street. Any given night, passers-by can watch themselves on large screen TVs as they watch the newscast through the windows. Most nights, at some point, someone from the 2News news team will deliver the news from Main Street itself, giving literal meaning to the station's brand "Fresh Air."

Veas sits in her office, just on the edge of the "bullpen." One full side of her nearly triangular office is softly frosted glass, allowing the noises of the bustling newsroom to be heard at all times. Thirteen years ago, in another building, she started at KUTV as an overnight producer. She worked her way through the normal ladder of shows to management as an Executive Producer, then Assistant News Director, and finally in 2005, News Director—a goal she has always had. Veas's office is modest, not much bigger than a cubicle itself. There are several unframed awards sitting on a cabinet shelf behind her. In one corner, a promotional 2News snowboard hangs artistically in mid air, complete with a mosaic design of the current news team's head-shots. Directly in front of Veas is a stack of resume tapes and DVDs—evidence that she's looking for someone to fill a position.

For Veas, being news director means she focuses on the "big picture" of the newscast. "What is [their] news philosophy. How do [they] put it in action."¹ She sees herself as a

champion for journalism—that it is her duty to make sure the station is covering everything it needs to, to keep the community connected and informed.

I should be setting the tone and the pace for how we handle that. When [station managers] are doing something that I disagree with, that I think is damaging to the news operation, my job is to push back, and fight for the news department. If I didn't believe I could be successful in covering news, and being a good journalistic organization, I would not be here. I wouldn't work for a company that put budget 100 percent ahead of the goal of what we do.²

Even though Veia is firmly in the journalism camp, she fully understands that in today's world, television news is a business. "If we're not a successful business we're all out of jobs... and what good do we do at that point? None. So if you don't pay attention to the budget side, you're not able to do the important work that we should be doing."³

Unique to Veia is her idea that on most days the news is giving the people what they want, letting them know what is going on in their communities. However, it is during most breaking news coverage that the news has a greater value.

On a day of an earthquake are we far more important and critical? Yes, absolutely, and that's really where we become information providers ... What should you be doing, where are the problems, what's happening? We're people's lifelines in those situations. In a Crandall Canyon Mine disaster, in [a kidnapping]...there's no better way to get that information out than by what we do, so we become extremely important in a community during significant events.⁴

Veia continues by explaining that as a station they are important during these major events because they keep the community connected from day to day. She acknowledges that as a news department they don't serve the same purpose everyday. The work they do on a daily basis as an information provider is important, but during a major story, whether local or national, the need they serve in the community is critical.⁵

Vea explains her position when it comes to covering longer, unplanned news stories. She is the station's advocate for journalistic excellence. She decides how far to go with a story and how much she expects the coverage to cost. If news coverage is required outside of normal news programming, she discusses the financial impact with the general sales manager of the station. The general sales manager will determine which clients need to be worked into the current broadcast schedule, as well as the advertisers that will need to be worked in after the urgent news subsides.⁶

So [the sales managers are] looking at deadlines on their clients. I'm looking at what's the most important priority from a news perspective. The GM is balancing between both of us and if it comes down to a fight, which never happens (laughs), he's the final say on who wins that fight.⁷

When it comes to serving the community, Vea takes an aggressive stance. The times have changed, even since she started thirteen years ago. It used to be news stations were strongest at 5 p.m. and 10 p.m.. That's not the case anymore. She explains how the immediacy of the Internet is affecting daily news routines:

People are getting information immediately, constantly, everywhere. You have to think faster, you have to be faster; to be competitive you cannot hold stories the way that we used to be able to hold stories and really work them. If you do, [it's] guaranteed somebody else will have it, and get it on the air.⁸

Vea adds, "I don't want to just be first. I want to be accurate."⁹ Her news team is encouraged to make the information available to the public as quickly as possible, but then to take the time to cover the story thoroughly.¹⁰

Vea understands the operation of the station as a business machine. She knows that it is important to have a good quality news product that will ultimately bring in the revenues the station needs to continue to produce news that services the public.

Con Psarras: KSL's Seasoned Veteran

In downtown Salt Lake, on the corner of South Temple and 300 West, stands the Triad Center, its brown silhouette matching the hue of the surrounding mountains. The building lies within view of not only the Salt Lake City capitol building, but also the main office building for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—a highly symbolic location for a community station owned by the Church.

At the southeast corner of the Triad Center is the office of Con Psarras, news director for KSL. The large windows in his office provide a panoramic view of the TRAX light rail station, allowing ample sunlight into the room—rivaled only by the brightness of the newsroom itself. Both stand in stark contrast to the dim, spartan hallways that connect the various areas of activity within the station.

Psarras carries the demeanor of a hurried professional, perhaps a product of his beginnings as a reporter for the University of Utah student paper, *The Daily Chronicle*, and his subsequent experience working for the Associated Press in Washington, D.C., *The Salt Lake Tribune*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. It was his exposure to the Watergate scandal while working for the Associated Press, that initially sparked his interest in working with the news; but it was a series of layoffs while he was attempting to gain full time status with *The Wall Street Journal*, that forced him into the realm of broadcasting.¹¹

His experience within the Salt Lake City broadcasting market is extensive as he has spent time at each of the three main stations. Initially Psarras worked at KSL as an investigative reporter. He then jumped to KUTV as managing editor and then news director. For the five

years he was at KUTV, the station went through four owners. He then went to KTVX for a single year in a managerial role. During that brief time ownership transitioned from United Television to News Corporation, and from News Corporation to Clear Channel. Psarras finally came back to KSL in 2008. Overall, he has worked for KSL sixteen out of the last twenty-two years. All this, and Psarras still states that he never really knew what he wanted to be “when he grew up.”¹²

Psarras of KSL has a similar take on his role as news director. He is there to set the tone and the standard, “And if I see us going too far in one direction, I think it’s my job to bring it back. Or if I see us not going far enough in other directions, to jump start it and to kick the necessary people to get it going. I think my job is more than long-term ecumenical kinds of ‘Where are we going to be in three years?’ or ‘Where are our resources going to be?’”¹³

Psarras likes to have his hands on the product. He insists on running the morning meetings where story ideas are discussed and the previous day’s shows are critiqued. After that point in his day, he relegates himself to administrative tasks.¹⁴ What frustrates Psarras, as a former reporter, is the management aspects of news directing, such as the monthly reports, the budgeting for expenses like satellite time, gasoline, salaries, and other contingencies. Psarras says that balancing these discretionary expenses is like finding “a way to rob Peter to pay Paul.”¹⁵ These responsibilities are important to him, and the station, but sometimes he misses “getting out in the street, writing stories... that’s just fun.”¹⁶

Psarras shoulders the weight of management, with an additional responsibility that most news directors don’t have to worry about:

We have the curse and blessing of being in the same building as our corporate parents, which operates very successful products in big markets. They don’t ever have to ride the elevator with the CEO, who pays that close attention to their product. So there’s that extra layer of scrutiny.¹⁷

Perhaps due to the proximity of upper level management, Psarras has no question as to what is expected of him from the ranking executives: keep the quality of the product high, and make money while doing it.¹⁸ The best way to do that, in Psarras' opinion, is through the hiring process: "To bring in people who understand that, and fit in, and are committed to the product and won't take it in a different direction."¹⁹ Psarras is, in many ways, the captain of a ship, finding the best crew mates and planning the direction of travel, all while acting under the close inspection of the fleet admiral—seated in the chair to his left.

Pat Benedict: KTVX's Interim News Director

Though he has a production-laden past, Pat Benedict is no stranger to news management. He made the unheard of jump from "field cameraman to news director overnight,"²⁰ in a small Ohio market. He then moved to Cleveland and again "migrated from the field to show producing."²¹ Eventually he made it to KUTV in Salt Lake City as the night-side executive producer and then assistant news director. He joined the KTVX team in 2002 as an assistant news director. The initiation of the sale of KTVX by Clear Channel to Providence Equity Partners in April of 2007 caused a newsroom shakeup, leaving Benedict with his "battlefield commission"²² as the interim news director.

The previous news director's office sits at the back corner of the news room, but it is empty and dark. Benedict chooses to make his foxhole in the cubicle farm; he leads the troops from within. He is frazzled but hurried and kind, wearing a sweater that looks like it has been with him since his days in Ohio. The newsroom is wide, expansive and rectangular, filled with

dozens of empty cubicles. Edit bays line the South wall. The current sale has taken its toll on team morale. Benedict does all he can to keep his team happy and productive in spite of extreme budget constraints.

A cranky director muddles through her scripts. An intern sits in the cubicle adjacent to Benedict's, reading "This Just In" by Bob Schieffer. The assignment editor leans back in front of the feed rack, tuning in a live shot. A handful of editors are tucked away in edit bays as colorful as their language. It's twenty minutes to show time, and there are more statues of the CW television network's characters, Wile E. Coyote and the Animaniacs, in the lobby and hallways than there are people in the newsroom. The place is empty, but not dead.

If Psarras is commanding his ship in the shadow of the fleet admiral, then Benedict is the captain of a lone ship in the sea, adrift without sails. The lingering sale that placed him in his interim position also placed him in a very tight financial position.

This deal has dragged on longer than any I've been a part [of], affiliate swaps and you name it. This thing has taken almost two years and it looked like it was dying on the vine up until the last minute. It was hard for [the newsroom] to maintain focus in the last few weeks. So, there's a palpable sense of relief.²³

Considering the dynamics of the sale, it's no wonder morale is low. At one point the station was more or less forced to survive month-to-month on revenue from its own sales team. Clear channel was no longer providing the necessary capital, and Provident Equity Partners was rethinking its offer to buy KTVX and more than 50 other stations.²⁴ To keep the budget balanced, employee overtime was outright banned and all freelance personnel, producers, reporters, etc., were given an indefinite leave of absence. Though his position is starkly different from his competitors, Benedict's passion for journalistic integrity has not wavered.

How I decided to try and handle this transition is [that] we are journalists first and foremost. It doesn't matter who owns us in the end, generally. We are a profession, specific with professional and ethical guidelines that pretty much steward what we do and dictate the arena that we work in. You have to make sure no lines are crossed. We have a mission. We have a community to serve. It may sound a little over the top, but it's a sacred mission in a lot of regards.²⁵

Benedict, like Psarras, misses being in the “trenches,” and finds himself, as news director, wearing numerous hats—“from accountant to psychiatrist,”²⁶—which is no where near as fun as being a journalist.

Benedict understands, as the others do, that television news is a commercial enterprise. He explains that when it comes to balancing journalistic ideals in a business orientation, there is a “partition, an intentional buffer zone between news and sales that you have to be conscious of.” But even then, “at a certain point the tide meets the shore, where we are a business. We're a journalistic enterprise, but we're a commercial enterprise as well.”²⁷ In an attempt to keep that division in the forefront of their minds, KTVX Managers have posted the Society of Professional Journalist's *Code of Ethics* in the center of their conference room where they hold daily planning meetings. As Benedict puts it, “It's important and it's not fleeting and it's not a style guide. It's a credo, its sort of a way of life.”²⁸

Summary

Vea, Psarras, and Benedict are keenly aware of their station's position as a business operation. They each understand the perspective of news production as a market-driven model, one that operates for a profit. Their role in this model is important as they are part of the check and balance system within the station. The news directors are the advocates for journalism and

public service, just as the sales managers are advocates for revenue and the general manager's role is to balance the other two. If a conflict arises, and a decision must be made that affects the station's revenue or public service, the general manager listens to the arguments and makes a decision. While it is rarely this simple in real life, it is still a system in place at each station. A system in which news directors are hired to operate as advocates for journalism.

All three news directors mentioned that an important part of their job was to "push back" like when the station was faced with a major conflict between journalistic norms and business norms, perhaps by a natural disaster that required more airtime to cover than a newscast would normally allow.

Vea, Psarras, and Benedict are typical of news directors nationally. Not only do they play a part in the television station's overall check and balance system, they also have to maintain the balance within their own news departments. All three news directors must balance the budget they receive from their parent company as they make decisions regarding news coverage. Some decisions are made annually when they allocate their budget between resources, talent, and expenses. Other decisions are made daily as the news directors choose which stories to cover and how extensively to cover each one.

NOTES

1. Tanya Vea, interview by author, Salt Lake City, Utah, 6 March 2008, page 3, lines 9-10.
2. Vea, interview, page 18, lines 2-8.
3. Vea, interview, page 18, lines 9-12.
4. Vea, interview, page 18, line 20 - page 19, line 7.
5. Vea, interview, page 19, lines 1-7.
6. Vea, interview, page 8, lines 15-22.
7. Vea, interview, page 8, lines 15-22.
8. Vea, interview, page 22, lines 5-6.
9. Vea, interview, page 22, lines 6-7.
10. Vea, interview, page 22, lines 5-7.
11. Con Psarras, Interview by author, Salt Lake City, Utah, March 12th, 2008, page 7, lines 5-9.
12. Psarras, interview, page 8, line 5.
13. Psarras, interview, page 9, lines 4-10.
14. Psarras, interview, page 9, line 1.
15. Psarras, interview, page 9, line 16.
16. Psarras, interview, page 8, line 7-11.
17. Psarras, interview, page 15, lines 16-21.
18. Psarras, interview, page 11, lines 7-16.
19. Psarras, interview, page 11, lines 16-18.
20. Patrick Benedict, interview by author, Salt Lake City, Utah, March 20th, 2008, page 2, lines 18-19.
21. Benedict, interview, page 3, lines 1-2.
22. Benedict, interview, page 3, lines 16-17.
23. Benedict, interview, page 6, lines 13-19.

24. Provident Equity was sued by Clear Channel for stalling and risked a loss of \$45.9 million if they backed out of a deal that included over 50 stations. After many legal battles, the parties ultimately agreed to a purchase price over \$80 million less than originally agreed upon. *Clear Channel Confirms Close of TV-Group Sale*. (Accessed 10 April, 2008) <http://news.backchannelmedia.com/newsletter/articles/17213/Clear-Channel-Confirms-Close-Of-TV-Group-Sale>; *Providence Equity May Back Out of 56 TV-Station Deal*, Providence Business News. (Accessed 10 April, 2008) <http://www.pbn.com/stories/28254.html>

25. Benedict, interview, page 4, lines 17-21.

26. Benedict, interview, page 6, line 5.

27. Benedict, interview, page 7, lines 4-8.

28. Benedict, interview, page 7, lines 17-18.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS

All three Salt Lake City news directors have their own budget to control. So, logically, the next questions are: If news directors have power, how does that impact their ability to cover and disseminate the news? With pressures from their corporate masters to stay within that budget, how do television news directors decide when to put the news before the budget, or the budget before the news?

This chapter discusses how Salt Lake City television news directors answer these questions. Drawing on oral history interviews with each news director, this chapter examines the similarities and differences in each news directors' approach, and shares examples of how their judgement was affected by budget and vice-versa.

Although these findings derive from interviews conducted in Salt Lake City, they can still provide larger insight into decisions made in other markets by news directors in similar circumstances. First, this chapter examines typical pressures faced by all three news directors, namely: the cost of breaking news, outside pressure from commercial sponsors, and unwanted attention that has the potential to harm the station's brand. Finally, it addresses the approaches taken by each news director to stay within budget.

The Cost Of Breaking News: The Crandall Canyon Mine

All three Salt Lake City news directors offered detailed explanations of their coverage of the collapse of the Crandall Canyon Mine during August of 2007. For each news director, the event served as an example of a time when he or she threw the budget out the window and covered a story regardless of the money involved. The mine, located nearly 130 miles south of Salt Lake City, initially collapsed on August 6, 2007, trapping six miners 1500 feet underground. Ten days later, three rescue workers were killed by a second collapse. It was a single, unplanned event that cost each news stations upwards of six figures. For the most part, the news directors were minimally chastened for going over budget, but their parent companies understood the circumstances and forgave them.

KSL's Con Psarras actually got a note from the chief operating officer of Bonneville that said, "I understand that you had to go over budget to cover that, your coverage was terrific, that's exactly what we want you to do. Congratulations."¹ Psarras adds, "Bonneville's a very successful company and very well managed. They know what we spend every month. They see the reports and they know what it costs to cover a story like that. I think I would be in greater jeopardy of losing my job, if we didn't cover that story well."²

Tanya Vea explained that KUTV's coverage also was extensive. KUTV was on the air every time a press conference was held, regardless of what effect it had on the station's immediate revenue: "We were interrupting programming constantly during that story, which disrupts revenue. Commercials are displaced and that is the revenue for the TV station. We didn't pull back at all."³ On a story that significant, Vea says she can ask for forgiveness. "There was nothing I could do—I had to cover the story. There's no way I could make up that amount of

money in one year without firing two or three people, which is not also a good option in the newsroom.”⁴ Vea was forgiven for going well over budget after she explained to a relatively new parent company what it could mean to future revenue if the story were not covered.

If Psarras and Vea were pleased with their coverage of the mine disaster, KTVX’s Benedict was button-bursting proud. Considering KTVX’s position, finances, and resources, Benedict probably has every right to be proud.

[Crandall Canyon] was literally the biggest story of the year in Utah. It was one of the biggest stories in the country. [We] don’t have the depth of resources our competitors have, but we can bring great force to bear. We have a lot of wily veterans. We have people who know the landscape, they’ve been in the community a long time, and they’ve a lot of background with mine disasters. We decided simply at that point in the game that we were going to own that story. We were in position to do it and we marshaled the resources. We spent six figures in one month just in overtime covering that thing. You know we have half the staff of [the other] guys, that means we have to work twice as hard, and they just delivered in spades.⁵

KTVX brought in generators to power their satellite trucks, rented hotel wings, and had land lines installed to cut cell phone costs. Benedict says it paid off. “We won that coverage handily. We were ahead of the curve on every single interval, we beat the dominant stations. It was embarrassing [for them]. We took them to the woodshed. [It was the] high water mark of my career, and I’ve been around a lot of good stuff.”⁶

Benedict says ownership “semi-kiddingly” joked that he was “spending money like it was 1982.” When he asked what they meant, the answer was, “You’re just spending whatever it takes to get it done.” In reply, Benedict quipped, “You know what I really like about this job? [That] I get to spend money like its 1982.”⁷

During the nearly month-long event, all three news directors felt it was their duty to inform the public of every new development. As they saw it, they were a “lifeline” to the community.⁸

Regardless of what the Crandall Canyon Mine collapse story would ultimately do to their budgets, each news director felt an obligation to inform the general public. Each news director went over budget by nearly \$100,000 on that one story. It is noteworthy that, eventually, each corporate owner also had a similar response: eventual understanding. This finding will be discussed more in depth later.

Pressure From Commercial Sponsors: Little Caesars Pizza

Placing the news before the budget also becomes an issue when major sponsors do something to warrant news coverage. Then, feeling like they have some leverage because of the money they spend for advertising, sponsors may attempt to buy their way out of coverage. Veal explained that it happens several times a year, but that “never once has it been successful. [We] have actually lost clients, big clients, before [we] have not done a story.”⁹

Psarras explained a specific instance where a minor news story caused a major client to pull its advertising from KSL. The story was about Little Caesars Pizza allegedly violating a series of labor laws by hiring minors to work in its stores.¹⁰ Before the station reported the story, it informed the sales department as a professional courtesy. When contacted, the ownership of Little Caesars Pizza told KSL, “We won’t authorize that story.” KSL explained they didn’t need authorization, they were simply giving them the opportunity to tell their side of the story or have the story run with a mention that Little Caesars Pizza offered no comment. Little Caesars Pizza declined. The story ran, and Little Caesars Pizza pulled its advertising. That is until ownership changed and they returned as clients. Psarras explained the effects giving in can have on a station that decides to cave to a client.

When you stop covering the news on behalf of an advertiser for financial reasons, you've lost your credibility—pack it in, go home, 'cause they don't trust you anymore. So yeah, absolutely, it was worth every penny we lost ... and they came back, and they're clients again. But, my advice to them is, if you don't want to be in the news, obey the law.¹¹

Unwanted Attention: When A Story Hits Close To Home

One final example related to putting the news before the budget are stories that involve staff. Veja explains the position she was in when her main sports anchor was charged with mortgage fraud. She had to deal with the issue on two levels. As manager of a news team she had to deal with the situation as a personnel issue, and as a news director and advocate of journalism she had to deal with the newsworthiness of the story. “We broke that story. We didn't shy away from it, because he sits on our set every single night.”¹² For Veja it was even more important that they covered the story, as it maintained a relationship of trust with the community.

Because of the trust that's placed in us, there's a great deal of respect for that, and you have to apply those basic journalism rules, even to the closest situations. So you can't say, because it's us, “We're not going to cover it.” If it's us, I want to be the first person telling you what happened. I don't want you hearing it from the *Tribune*, from KSL, from KTVX, I want you to know from us, because that lets you know you can trust us. We're telling you the facts, and we're telling it even when it hits absolutely close to home.¹³

Balancing The Budget: How Salt Lake City News Directors Do It

Just as there are times when news content may dictate a stretching of the budget, there are also times when the budget must take precedence, to ensure the financial stability of the station. Benedict, Psarras, and Veja each recounted experiences when they felt pressure from management to cut costs. What was discovered from their comments is that, while most budget cuts

ultimately have some negative impact on content, there are multiple ways to cut back on costs, while still fulfilling the “information provider” role in the community. The following are examples from Benedict, Veal, and Psarras, outlining how they handled specific situations when management challenged them to cut down on expenses. Of particular note are the different methods each director used, while attempting to accomplish the same goal.

Pat Benedict - KTVX

During our interview, Benedict relayed an incident that was clearly a learning experience for the KTVX management. Near the end of the KTVX sale, the station was under a large amount of stress from their corporate managers to track expenses and meet budgets so that the purchasing party, Providence Equity Partners, would know exactly what they were getting into financially. In an attempt to trim costs, Benedict tells of a moment when he and his staff hesitated on a story, and what resulted from that hesitation:¹⁴

There was a massive bus wreck with skiers at the very far corner of the [state]. That’s a story, it’s in our state. Its part of our coverage area, it’s not a heavily populated area but you know a lot of interest throughout the state. And normally we would have gone on something like that in a heartbeat. And honestly we waited, we waited for just a few hours to see how it was developing. Whereas our competitors just went. We looked at ourselves as managers and went “Ahh, that will never happen again.” There’s always a way to justify or reforecast to balance [the cost of coverage] over time.¹⁵

The event would have been an expensive one to report, given the travel, satellite, and other expenses that would have been required to adequately cover the story. In their hesitation, however, Benedict and his staff allowed their competition to arrive on the scene first, ultimately delivering the story to the community before them. Yes, they saved money, but Benedict seemed

to deliver the story with a tinge of regret, as evidenced by his statement that they decided never to repeat a similar mistake again.

Benedict wasn't the only news director to make such a statement. All three news directors, when referencing their justifications for going over budget, or the actions they intended to take to cut costs, spoke with specific focus on the long term. In other words, the news needs to be covered right now, and costs will be taken care of later. Another statement from Benedict hints at this idea, and recalls the aforementioned story of when he needed to answer for cutting into broadcast time and taking away advertising revenue during the Crandall Canyon Mine disaster. Knowing the story needed to be covered, Benedict shares this characteristic response:

You know, someone said "Man, you're handling news like its 1982," and I asked him what he meant by that. He said, "You're just spending whatever it takes to get it done." That includes helicopter deployments and things like that, and I said, "You know what I really like about this job?" and he said, "What's that?" I said, "I get to spend money like its 1982." It was great ... it was great. Our corporate masters recognized [in the end] that news serves the community, that's why you do it. You don't always necessarily make money off of it, but you do build your bones for the future.¹⁶

Benedict addressed the need to spend money "now" for a story, by referencing the long-term benefit that would come from the coverage to management. His implication is the possibility for increased trust from the public, which leads to more viewers, which leads to increased advertising revenue. As mentioned before, all three news directors used this shift to the long-term perspective when addressing budget management, which will be furthered evidenced as we move on to the experiences of Psarras and Vea.

Con Psarras - KSL

When asked for an example of a time when the budget needed to be cut back, Psarras, instead of pointing to stories that were cut, decided to shift focus to staffing, with a statement that “the news budget is substantial, but a majority of it is salary and it’s contractual. We can’t change it. You’re stuck to seventy or eighty percent of your money [being] non discretionary.”¹⁷ Outside of that, “Yeah, I got a limited amount of money to spend, and I can steal some from here and play shell games with it, but at the end of the day it’s gotta balance out.”¹⁸

Psarras was adamant that content isn’t sacrificed directly as he attempts to cut back costs. Instead, when corporate managers begin to question him on costs, Psarras points to the long term, and the changes he’s attempting to make over time:

I’ve certainly been under pressure and will always be under pressure to make budget. We’re realistic at KSL, what’s happening around the country is not lost on us—there’s a deflationary trend on, quite honestly. Talent costs. [If]you’re an anchor in market 35, once upon a time you thought you’d make “X” number of dollars, that isn’t the case anymore. Every anchor I replace, we are paying them less money. [The] corporate people who oversee me say, “You gotta get that down.” I say, “We are, just give it time.” Because it’s attrition. It doesn’t happen in one year, but over a period of time. They expect a reduction in the overall percentage of money devoted to news. That is going to happen or we’ll go out of business.¹⁹

Once again, the long-term perspective makes an appearance in Psarras’s remark for management to “just give it time.” If you are consistently paying the people that you bring onto your staff less money, then, at the end of the day (assuming similar staffing numbers), costs will eventually go down. Psarras recognizes that similar cost cutting is “going to hit everybody in this industry,” citing such large media conglomerates as Cox and Gannet as examples.²⁰ He mentions computerized automation and the cutting of non-critical positions, as the ways stations can maintain the same quality of news product, while working with a shrinking budget.²¹ It then

becomes clearer why Benedict and Psarras both chose to reference the long-term perspective when reporting to management about budgeting issues: the building of audience loyalty and trust, and the measured reduction of costs through staffing, takes time.

Tanya Vea - KUTV

The long-term perspective also arose in Vea's response to budgeting questions, including how KUTV's new ownership by a private equity group (Cerberus Capital Management) has affected their budget, compared to prior ownership by CBS:

I would say some of our strategies have changed, but how we balance [the budget] has not. Our commitment to covering the news has not changed, and it hasn't wavered even with them. They don't understand it as well as CBS understood it, because they're not a TV company. They are a private equity firm, a financial company, so they see it from dollars and cents. But they are very open and willing to learn what our business is. When they see the impact of, "I can save you \$100,000, and not cover Crandall Canyon, but we will [drop to] fourth place, and you will lose millions of dollars." If you're a financial person, what makes sense? Go spend your hundred-thousand.²²

Veas is in a position where she must justify expenses on news broadcasts to a financial institution that is used to dealing in more concrete terms. Veas addresses their concerns, like Benedict and Psarras, with a shift to the long-term perspective. Yes, it costs money to gather and disseminate information to the public, but failing in that obligation will result in loss of viewership, which equates to lost revenue over time.

Competition In News

Some may wonder, “Why, if news stations care so much about serving the community, do they worry so much about being competitive and increasing their ratings? After all, higher ratings translate into increased revenue, so are they not just focusing on the bottom line?” Throughout these interviews the news directors were consistently speaking in terms of competition; getting stories first, covering stories better, or keeping up in terms of equipment and resources. The ultimate goal? Ratings. But why? Their ideas and explanations were eye-opening.

The outsider may see ratings as a way to keep track of “who beat who,” and thereby gets to charge top dollar for their air time. Television news is a competitive arena. There is a market orientation within the way stations operate. How do news directors maintain journalistic integrity while managing this commercial enterprise? Consider the news directors’ perspectives of ratings and what they mean. Veja sees it as a measurement of customer satisfaction: “Ratings mean revenue, but for us it’s also who’s watching us. If we’re not number one, that means, to the viewer, we’re not doing the best job. We may be doing the best job in our minds, but if the viewers aren’t giving you ratings, they don’t think you are.”²³

Ratings can be seen as a measurement of how well news directors are doing at giving the community what they want. Benedict sees the daily numbers in a slightly different way. For him, they are a way to know who in the community is watching his product. Using the ratings he can determine “whether they’re senior citizens, [or] women ages 25 to 54.” In reference to the competitiveness of covering the Crandall Canyon mine disaster, he points out that KTVX’s ratings also came with an increased viewer response.

There was a spike in email and viewer comments thanking us for the depth of coverage. This was a twenty-four hour concern for tens of thousands of

people. We chose to do what we had to do to cover it, that meant interrupting paid programming.²⁴

Psarras and Veal both offered explanations for the need to have increased viewer loyalty and trust, each noting how their network lead-in affected the newscasts. Psarras pointed out the lack of hot shows in the NBC lineup. Although it caused ratings to drop slightly, he was quick to point out the strength of KSL is its viewer loyalty. “So, we need to maintain that, cause we can’t rely on the network. We’re blessed with the loyalty and the brand loyalty that we’ve had. We can’t lose that. That’s the golden egg.”²⁵ Veal points to CBS’s lineup and more importantly the 2008 Writer’s Guild of America strike that lasted from November, 2007, to February, 2008, to explain a need for even more loyalty and viewer trust, so that regardless of what CBS hands them in carryover viewers, loyal viewers will turn to KUTV on their own.²⁶ Each news director explained how competition serves the market, as news directors increase their audience’s trust and allegiance, the number of viewers increase, and ratings increase. As ratings increase, revenue increases, and increased revenue eventually leads to a larger budget, allowing them to cover more news, and thereby better serve the community.

Summary

It is evident from these interviews that news directors often find themselves in positions where the news and the budget square off. They have made it clear that it is their duty as news directors to make sure the news always wins. The methods they each use to guarantee that news remains the most important part of the equation varied only slightly. Perspective is the most interesting common factor in their responses. News is handled on an urgency basis: What needs to be covered now?

When the budget is mentioned, it is something that can be sorted out later. What we see, then, is a pattern among all three news directors; the shifting of perspective to the long term when dealing with budget issues. News is inherently short term. But management and station survival rely upon budget forecasts and projections, which creates an interesting dichotomy of perspectives—possibly worthy of further research in other markets with other news directors. As Benedict remarked, “There’s always a way to justify or reforecast to balance it out over time.”²⁷

Though each news director spoke briefly about the effect advertisers can have on news coverage, only Psarras felt comfortable enough to speak in particulars about their advertising client, Little Caesars Pizza. Perhaps this is because Little Caesars ownership had changed and the company had returned as an advertising client. Without providing specifics, the other two stations had similar experiences with advertisers pulling or threatening to pull advertising dollars if a story was aired. Each news director claimed that at no time have they held back on reporting a story that involved a client.

Vea’s experience of having one of her own anchors in the news clearly illustrates the “news before budget” attitude. Again, in the interest of credibility, she instructed the news department to cover a story that hit uncomfortably close to home.

NOTES

1. Con Psarras, interview by author, Salt Lake City, Utah, March 12th, 2008, page 24, lines 18-19.
2. Psarras, interview, page 24, line 21 - page 25 line 3.
3. Tanya Vea, interview by author, Salt Lake City, Utah, 6 March 2008, page 7, lines 12-16.
4. Vea, interview, page 7, lines 21-23.
5. Vea, interview, page 7, line 23 - page 8, lines 1-10.
6. Patrick Benedict, interview by author, Salt Lake City, Utah, March 20th, 2008, page 8, line 22 - page 9, line 23.
7. Benedict, interview, page 10, lines 2-11.
8. Vea, interview, page 18, line 20 - page 19, line 7.
9. Vea, interview, page 12, lines 5-6.
10. "Little Caesar's Utah operator fined over child labor." The Salt Lake Tribune, July 19, 2007, <http://www.proquest.com.erl.lib.byu.edu/> (accessed April 1, 2009).
11. Psarras, interview, page 14, lines 8-14.
12. Vea, interview, page 11, lines 22-23.
13. Vea, interview, page 15, lines 5-12.
14. Benedict, interview, page 10, line 18-22 - page 11, lines 1-3.
15. Benedict, interview, page 11, lines 2-13.
16. Benedict, interview, page 10, lines 2-11.
17. Psarras, interview, page 17, lines 16-18.
18. Psarras, interview, page 17, lines 14-15.
19. Psarras, interview, page 18, lines 9-20.
20. Psarras, interview, page 18, lines 17-23 - page 19, lines 1-6.
21. Psarras, interview, page 19, lines 2-6.
22. Vea, interview, page 16, lines 21-23 - page 17, lines 1-7.
23. Vea, interview, page 23, lines 21-23 - page 24, line 1.
24. Benedict, interview, page 9, lines 11-15.
25. Psarras, interview, page 12, lines 11-17.

26. Vea, interview, page 24, lines 9-13; Vince Horiuchi. "KUTV ratings take a big hit." The Salt Lake Tribune, February 29, 2008, <http://www.proquest.com.erl.lib.byu.edu/> (accessed March 31, 2009).

27. Benedict, interview, page 11, lines 2-13.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The Salt Lake City television market is home to numerous different station ownership situations. From the start, KTVX was owned by a corporate parent company. KUTV spent a majority of its time as a family-owned station. Only in the last decade was it sold to a parent company. There was an initial distinction between the two stations, but now they are in similar situations, as both are owned by outside investment firms. KSL stands alone as being locally owned. Though they are owned by a parent company that owns and operates several other stations, the parent company is headquartered in the same building as KSL.

Interviews and research conducted for this thesis suggest that KSL's ownership situation has had a profound impact on its coverage of news in the Salt Lake City market. Having a parent company or owner reside within the broadcast market appears to have the effect of increased coverage of local issues. Throughout these interviews, all three news directors explained their priorities in covering local issues first and foremost. Both Benedict (KTVX) and Veal (KUTV) however, explained that they must justify the expense of covering local issues and breaking news to their parent companies. Psarras, on the other hand, explained that KSL staff are expected to cover these things and cover them well.

Chapter Three explored the transitions of the three local stations as they shifted their views of news programming from being a loss-leader to a profitable product of the station. New technologies, disasters, local stories and national stories each increased the potential for generating profits through television news. Exploring this transition once again showed that the

locally owned stations saw their newscasts as more than a business venture to gain profit; they saw a vehicle for exploring local issues and serving the local community.

This part of the study reinforces the findings of Margaret Knutson, who spent several years in the Salt Lake City market exploring how news stations perceive their audience. In an interview with KUTV news director Mike Youngren, she inquired about owner George Hatch's agenda for the station.

Hatch's agenda for the station is to make money, and that's legitimate. But he's also committed to broadcasting in this community. He is, and always has been, committed to being an entity in this community—not one to be reckoned with, but one to be understood and felt in a positive, constructive way.¹

Each station experienced its own transitional path to a market mentality, but it was the local ownership of KSL and KUTV during that transition that maintained the journalistic ideals of public service—even while the news departments developed into market-driven operations.

The main goal of this study was to better understand the news directors' daily challenge of balancing the business orientation of television news with the public service aspect of journalism. This study was informed by John McManus' market-based model of news production and used oral history to explore, on a practical level, how news directors obtained that balance. Oral history interviews were used in order to obtain a "richer, more vivid recreation" of the issue.² The main goal of this study was to explore this conflict on a personal level, to learn from the personal experiences of news directors what attitudes or methods they employ to maintain traditionally defensible journalistic norms within the market-driven industry of news production.

The findings of this research reinforce the findings of previous researchers; that news is ultimately affected by the bottom line as it is balanced with journalistic norms. Through these oral histories and interviews, the model argued by McManus was fully supported. The news directors' decisions concerning news coverage are complicated. "The owner's instructions, which take into account the profit demand from the market for investors, are channeled through corporate headquarters, where they become more specific, and are then passed on to media firm management."³ From there, the news directors and their newsrooms merge principles of journalism and business. Thus, television news "becomes a commodity shaped by a collection of markets, an elaborate compromise."⁴ This study highlighted the methods and attitudes that news directors use to negotiate this "elaborate compromise."

This study also reinforced the findings of Knutson's dissertation from 1989. She found that the way the newsrooms conceptualize their audience allowed them to "smudge the line" between "meeting the economic demands of the organization" and the "betray[ing] of professional ideals." News workers were able to justify focusing their efforts "at different times and in different ways" on either of the two major forces.⁵

While this study focused more specifically on the news directors of the Salt Lake City stations it was noted that Knutson's findings were still valid. Con Psarras of KSL explained that the audience he was creating news for, wanted their news to be "fast-paced." He continues, "We feel we have to make sure they get a pretty full diet of news of the day; international, national, local, just about every time we put on a product—which takes time away from doing longer format."⁶ His concept of audience in this instance is that they are looking for lots of news fast,

so he is unable to provide longer, more informative pieces that would be more socially responsible and more in line with his professional ideals.

Another instance of this mentality of smudging the line between a news director's professional ideals and the economic demands of business was seen in Pat Benedict's interview as he discussed the role of Nielsen's overnight ratings. He explained that the overnight ratings are the index by which they measure how many people are watching their newscasts and moreover the types of people that are watching. He explained that their decision to broadcast longer pieces in their nightly newscasts was a calculated choice. "You take a risk...if you don't have an interest in that subject, you're gone in a heartbeat." Benedict points out that the "overnight report card" from Nielsen tells you if viewers left during or before that particular story. That drop-off "mitigates your overall average...and at the end of the day that's what your advertisers are pointing at."⁷

While television stations have a system of checks and balances in place to keep the sales and news departments separate, news directors still have the responsibility of balancing their own news budget with quality news coverage in the interest of serving the public. This study suggests that in the Salt Lake City market, each of the news directors had slightly different ideas and methods for maintaining balance. But their goals and perspectives were similar: to put news as a public service always before budget concerns. Regardless of whether it's breaking news, a story about a major contributing sponsor, or one of their own team, news takes precedence for these news directors. Budget concerns may have an impact on the big picture of news, affecting resources and staffing, but never individual stories.

The primary finding of this research is that, for Salt Lake City television stations, traditional, normative journalistic values take precedence over budgetary pressures in the short term, particularly for immediate and urgent news. On the other hand, budgetary concerns are addressed in the long term, as news directors try to make up for unforeseen expenses by making discretionary cuts or, in some cases, personnel reductions. As these news directors spoke of serving the public, they consistently characterized their daily role as information providers for their communities.

According to Veal, her news department's position as an information provider is important to the community.

In the case of most days, are we just telling you kinda what's going on around there? Yes. Is it critical to your life? Maybe, I don't know, depends on what the story is. Is it critical to everybody's life? No. On a day of an earthquake are we far more important and critical? Yes, absolutely, and that's really where we become information providers. We're people's lifelines in those situations.⁸

All three news directors were each quick to use the Crandall Canyon Mine collapse, which occurred six months prior to these interviews, as an example of providing service to the community by covering breaking news. Each news director made the decision to cover the story in depth and to provide updates on a daily and sometimes hourly basis. Veal even went so far as to say that her station's coverage was a "lifeline" during important situations like the mine collapse.⁹ Each news director was well aware of the financial costs associated with covering the tragedy as thoroughly as they did. However, regardless of the repercussions it would bring in the long term, they covered the incident for the public's benefit.

Budgetary concerns appear to be addressed in long-term budgeting. In this regard, news directors are obliged to put financial concerns ahead of journalistic ones, at least in the long-

term. High expenses and shrinking budgets result in the reduction of resources, including hiring fewer people in the newsrooms. Each news director said that budgets do not affect their daily coverage of news. Psarras pointed out that the stories KSL chose not to cover were either all “investigative projects” or stories he called “discretionary.”¹⁰ When it came to the budget, Psarras explained that 70 to 80 percent of his budget was non-discretionary, locked up in salaries and contractual agreements. What remained was what he could use to cover expenses like satellite time, travel expenses, and overtime. Psarras added that his station was aware of the “deflationary trend” across the nation, and that salaries for anchors were no longer what they once were.¹¹ Furthermore, Psarras spoke of the industry trend of automation for certain newsroom functions, such as graphics and studio cameras. Such automation, Psarras believes, would eventually be a necessity in all newsrooms. In order for news departments to continue to deliver what they believe is the same quality of news with smaller budgets, they will need to cut down on the non-discretionary costs, either using fewer resources or fewer people—or both.¹²

Occasionally, budget concerns cause news directors to hesitate when deciding how to cover breaking news. However, when considering the long term effects of their decisions, they error on the side of covering the story and paying for it later. The news directors agreed that not covering stories of this nature would negatively impact the viewer’s loyalty, station’s credibility, and ultimately the station’s revenue.¹³

In one such instance, Benedict related an experience in which he regretted not covering the story of a ski bus crash in the Southeastern corner of Utah. “We looked at ourselves as managers and went ‘Ahh, that will never happen again.’ There’s always a way to justify or reforecast to balance it out over time.”¹⁴

Vea explains the “slippery slope” that comes from not covering a story of such scope: “You start to quickly impact your ratings, which impacts your revenue, which impacts my budget. It’s a circular motion. So we throw everything at those stories. And I don’t worry about the cost initially. I worry about it a week after the story, and then I’ve got to go make it up. I’ve got to figure out how I’m going to make it up and offset it for the rest of the year.”¹⁵

It is noteworthy that even when the news directors have their attention focused on serving the community and covering breaking news, they view the situations through an economic frame. Covering the urgent news is not only seen as a public service to inform the community, but as a necessary step to prove to their viewers that they are the best source for news—thus ensuring continued viewer support, which translates into continued financial support.

This study also illustrates the influence ownership plays in the decisions news directors make. Benedict explained the challenge of covering immediate news under the watchful eye of a distant owner. During the first week of February, 2008, the president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints died. This highly significant occasion caused Salt Lake City television stations to provide coverage “day in and day out for six or seven days straight.”¹⁶ Even in the midst of a budget transition, when the ownership of KTVX was looking to make the station look attractively profitable, Benedict looked to the long term. “With a smaller staff we accrued a lot of overtime. We just reforecast and justify.”¹⁷

As news director of a locally owned station, Psarras experienced an entirely different circumstance: He would have been in more trouble had KSL not spent appropriately to sufficiently cover a big story. “They know what we spend every month,” Psarras says of KSL’s owners. “They see the reports and they know what it costs to cover a story like the [Crandall

Canyon mine]. I think I would be in greater jeopardy of losing my job, if we didn't cover that story well.”¹⁸

The owners of KSL expect Psarras and the news department to cover the news as it deems necessary. The owners of KSL have an interest in the local community and how it is served, as it is their community as well. On the other hand, the other two news directors find themselves reminding their owners, distant investment groups, of the importance of serving the Salt Lake City community. Occasionally, that means reminding them that good coverage will eventually bring in more revenue in the long run. Benedict explained the eventual understanding of KTVX's new ownership: “They recognized in the end that news serves the community. That's why you do it. You don't always necessarily make money off of it, but you do build your bones for the future.”¹⁹

Vea had similar experience as she shared her explanation with KUTV's new ownership. “I can save you \$100,000, and not cover Crandall Canyon, and we will become fourth place, and you will lose millions of dollars. If you're a financial person, what makes sense? Go spend your hundred-thousand.”²⁰

Of perhaps lesser significance, this study also finds that the news directors in Salt Lake City consider ratings and competition to be healthy, motivating forces. Each news director looked at the daily ratings or overnights provided by Nielsen Media Research as a tool that ultimately helped them to serve the public. As Vea explained, the ratings were a measurement of their popularity in the community, a way for them to know if they were doing the best job and delivering the best news for their community.²¹ For Benedict it was also a measure of who was watching his news product, information he could use to be sure his coverage was relevant to his

viewers.²² The common consent among the news directors was that higher ratings meant that in the long run they would be able to expand their coverage and further serve the community.

While the demands to stay within budget and to bring in revenue are tangible and readily apparent, these news directors expressed a desire to be journalistically accurate and to provide news as a public service. More than anything, these news directors put a high premium on their station's credibility in the community. However, the two forces balance out because news directors and parent companies both realize that the public has expectations for any journalistic enterprise. If those expectations are not met, the public will not support the television station as a business enterprise. The measure of these expectations is expressed in a station's credibility. Credibility is as important to the public as money is to the market-driven business of news. Credibility is the currency in the news marketplace that assures that stations will continue to attempt to balance public service broadcasting with the market-driven industry.

Limitations of This Study

Several factors limit the generalizability of this study; the time frame of the study, the size of the Salt Lake market, and the ownership structures of the stations in the study. This study was conducted at a unique time in broadcast history. Most of these interviews were recorded in early 2008, which was before the beginning signs of the current economic depression. Had these interviews taken place in late 2008 or early 2009, the responses would most likely have been characterized more by the current situation and not as optimistic, open, or reflective. In the year following these interviews, each station was forced to lay off dozens of employees for financial reasons.

Salt Lake City is an average sized market, comparable to Columbus, Ohio, or Kansas City, Missouri. Markets that are larger or smaller than Salt Lake City will have other variables inherently present that would prevent the findings of this research from being fully applicable. Likewise, the ownership structures of the stations in other markets are not going to be identical to the situations found in this study. Therefore the findings of this study are less likely to apply to outside markets.

Mentioned in the first chapter was the bias that is inherent in the methodology of using oral history interviews. Narrators, in an attempt to please the interviewer, will often share the information for which they feel the interviewer is looking. Also, oral history interviews rely on the narrator's memory to accurately recall and describe past events and situations. This subjectivity can affect the interpretation of the interviews and limit the generalizability of the results.²³

Regardless of these limitations, this study set out to understand some of the methods and attitudes of Salt Lake City news directors as they balance the ideal of public service with the reality of operating as a business. At some level, the findings of this study can still support and inform future studies of this nature.

Suggestions For Future Research

The findings of this research, while applicable to the Salt Lake City market, are inadequate to make widespread suppositions about the situations within other media environments. As a result, it is proposed that the examination of the concepts introduced in this research be expanded, within other media environments. Namely, the concepts of balance

between news and budget, the long-term perspective associated with budget cutbacks, and how news directors view ratings should be explored in a variety of markets. Such information would prove invaluable to the already-existing body of research on the news media. It also would allow for cross examination of markets, and would open the door for further questions and discovery of themes on the subject.

Additional research could be performed focusing on the effects of ratings sweeps stunts on journalism. Benedict mentioned the games news departments have to play to get ratings. This raises the question of whether ratings are really measuring the success of a station's viewer-satisfaction, as they claim. Or, are the ratings measuring each station's ability to manipulate the system?²⁴

Research also could be explored in regards to the changes that have taken place in the television news industry since these interviews were recorded. Namely the economic decline of the nation and the media. Many stations experienced layoffs across the nation, including all three stations in this study. Of the news directors interviewed, only Psarras remains at his post. Benedict was fired shortly after the sale to Providence Equity Partners was completed. It is speculated within the KUTV newsroom that Veal left her position voluntarily because she did not want to be the one to execute those layoffs.

This could be evidence that television news is again experiencing a moment of transition, where corporate demands for profit are beginning to outweigh the journalistic standard of public service. It is entirely possible that Benedict lost his position because he spent money "like it was 1982."²⁵ When Veal was discussing her obligation to the station's parent company, she commented, "If I didn't believe I could be successful in covering news, and being a good

journalistic organization, I would not be here. I wouldn't work for a company that put budget 100 percent ahead of the goal of what we do." Again this is only speculation about their situations. However, considering that advertising revenues are shrinking and demands for profit are increasing across the industry, it is highly likely that less devoted and less experienced individuals will become news directors.²⁶ These new news directors' loyalties may be less tied to the ethical standards and journalistic creeds and more connected to the parent companies' goal of profit.

The findings in this report would suggest that were this to happen, the new advocates would need to focus on short-term public service, long-term budgeting and overall credibility if they sought to have the communities' financial support.

This study suggests that, at least during the tenure of these three news directors, the Salt Lake City television news market was managed by advocates of journalism and public service who were able to balance journalistic ideals with the demands of business.

NOTES

1. Knutson interview with Mike Youngren, December, 1987, p.10, cited in Margaret Knutson, "The Audience in the News: Ethnographic Observations of Local Television News Productions," (Ph.D. diss., University of Utah, 1989), 81.
2. Bonnie Brennen, "Toward a History of Labor and News Work: The Use of Oral Sources in Journalism," *The Journal of American History*, 83, no. 2 (1996): 571.
3. McManus, *Market-Based Model*, 315.
4. McManus, *Market-Based Model*, 315.
5. Knutson, "The Audience in the News", 303.
6. Con Psarras, interview by author, Salt Lake City, Utah, March 12th, 2008, page 23, lines 12-14.
7. Patrick Benedict, interview by author, Salt Lake City, Utah, March 20th, 2008, page 18, lines 12-16.
8. Tanya Vea, interview by author, Salt Lake City, Utah, 6 March 2008, page 18, lines 16-23.
9. Vea, interview, page 18, lines 23.
10. Psarras, interview, page 16, lines 20-21.
11. Psarras, interview, page 18, lines 11.
12. Psarras, interview, page 18, line 22 - page 19, line 6: they're cuttin' back and news budgets are smaller and smaller and smaller every year. And they're not producing less product. They're producing as much, if not more product. So they're stretching it pretty thin and they're doing automation and you see a lot of graphics systems that are now eliminating Chryon positions, and eliminating editing positions, and graphic artists positions, floor crew positions with automated cameras and robots and thats ...thats the trend. That's going to hit everybody in this industry. We're not immune to that or in anyway protected from it.
13. Vea, interview, page 6, line 6.
14. Benedict, interview, page 11, lines 11-13.
15. Vea, interview, page 6, lines 6-13.
16. Benedict, interview, page 13, lines 19.
17. Benedict, interview, page 13, lines 20-21.
18. Psarras, interview, page 25, lines 1-3.
19. Benedict, interview, page 10, lines 9-10.
20. Vea, interview, page 17, lines 4-7.

21. Vea, interview, page 23, lines 21-23.
22. Benedict, interview, page 18, lines 19-23.
23. Thomas Lee Charlton, Lois E. Myers & Rebecca Sharpless, *Handbook of Oral History* (Walnut Creek, CA:Altamira Press, 2006),11,74.
24. Benedict, interview, page 13, lines 3-8: We deliver that content. We stylize it. We showcase it, we apply luster to it to make it more applicable and accessible...maintain story flow...things like that. We've still gotta turn the Nielsen meters. We've gotta keep people plugged in...to get credit for their viewer-ship, you know. So there are intrinsic games that you have to play in this arena, doesn't mean you compromise your journalism.
25. Benedict, interview, page 10, lines 6-7.
26. Michael Malone, "Cover Story: Dawn of the Post "Star Anchor" Era," *Broadcasting & Cable*, April 6, 2009.

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