Local News and Television Literacy at the Intersections of Geography, Race, and Class

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Recent controversies such as Sinclair Broadcasting's must-run segments for local affiliates have provided opportunities for discussing the practical and ideological functions of commercial news in the classroom. At our small, rural college, we discussed theories of commercial news production and framing in multiple courses, including Media Ethics, Critical Cultural Studies, and History and Economy of Telecommunications. Students read and applied frameworks including Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, Bennett's four news biases that matter, and McChesney's work on ownership and consolidation. Much of the student-generated discussion revolved around national television news sources, such as Fox News, MSNBC, CNN, and satirical/pundit-led news like *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight*. Students never referenced news from local television affiliates. While this is largely attributable to the prevalence of cord-cutting, accessing television via Internet streaming services, and other typical generational viewing patterns, we believe that examining the local news available on broadcast television generates discussion of television literacy concepts and issues that are less apparent when discussing national news.

One key concept that emerged when discussing local news was television markets. Students in one course selected geographic proximity of events or issues as an important element of "useful" news. They immediately identified that very few of the news stories they found involved events or issues occurring within a 100-mile radius of our college's location. One student summarized the problem of local news not featuring geographically relevant stories by explaining that she learned more about what was going on in the community from her job as a restaurant server than from television or newspapers. Other students concurred that if they heard sirens or experienced something unusual, they would either likely never find out what happened or would be likely to ask neighbors or friends (possibly receiving inaccurate information). Class participants identified additional potential repercussions of not having geographically proximate local news, including disinterest from viewers in areas outside the typical coverage zone, not having adequate information about local elections, and seeing irrelevant advertisements and events promoted. Mapping the geographic proximity of "local" news stories helps illustrate the importance and influence of television markets for students in a concrete way; asking students how they would find out details about an incident they witnessed or heard about also encourages them to think about their use (or non-use) of television news.

Participants in two classes also discussed issues of representation in local news. Students' examinations of local news stories largely followed patterns discussed in readings, including underrepresentation of communities of color, overrepresentation of

people of color as criminals, and underrepresentation of rural areas. They also noticed that representation of working-class communities and people largely focused on criminality, particularly unusual crimes.

For our surrounding area, which is largely rural and working-class, the few stories we found on local television news tended to involve unusual crimes and/or overt racism attributed to the rural area. For example, one story covered by the local Fox affiliate station involved a white supremacist arrested for possessing (and inadvertently exposing himself to) ricin. Communities and individuals of color were almost entirely absent from news stories about our area; students theorized this was because these communities and individuals do not fit the typical "frame" for how media portray (and how we as viewers often understand) rural, working-class areas. One example of a local story with potential national implications not covered in local television news was the November 2017 election of a Latina lesbian candidate to a local mayoral office. While we saw the candidate mentioned in a few national news stories about LGBTQ+ candidates and a few articles in LGBTQ+ publications, her candidacy and victory were not featured in local television news coverage. Local television news also did not cover recent efforts for access to Spanish-language election materials in a nearby county. Examining local television news stories that involve the intersections of race, class **and** geography illuminated how these frames work not just in urban or suburban areas, but also in perpetuating stereotypical or incomplete portrayals of rural areas.

The potential repercussions for television news portrayals of the Atlanta metro area was not an issue raised in class discussion, but arose as we considered further activities and strategies for analyzing the intersections of race, class, and geography in local news for this response. Given that our area is relatively geographically isolated and that many people in our local community do not have time or access to travel to Atlanta, how might viewers in our community understand or feel about Atlanta based on how local news portrays the city? We are currently discussing perspective-taking strategies and activities for examining news constructions of Atlanta at the intersection of race and class and welcome suggestions.