

An Informed Vote?
Election Coverage Spring 2001

A Grand Rapids Institute for
Information Democracy
Report

GRIID is an affiliate of the
Community Media Center

GRIID



Methodology

This report is the result of a 30-day study of the three Grand Rapids TV stations: WOOD TV8 (6 & 11pm), WZZM 13 (6 & 11pm) and WXMI 17 (10pm), from May 12 through June 10, 2001. Each day's newscasts were taped and then viewed by Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy staff and volunteers. News logs were kept for each program with specific codes assigned for each of the areas of interest that were documented.

The Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy (GRIID) is an affiliate of the Community Media Center (www.grcmc.org). GRIID offers Media Literacy training and resources to the community in order to help the public actively participate in the consumption and creation of media and to promote democratic values within all media systems(www.grcmc.org/griid).

Summary of Major Findings

Of the 3 local TV stations studied WOODTV8 had substantially more election information than WZZM13 & FOX17, especially with the Grand Rapids School Board race.

On WOODTV8 we heard Grand Rapids School Board Candidate voices a total of 6 minutes and 54 seconds - on WZZM13 & FOX17 we *never* heard candidate voices.

Non-Grand Rapids-based Election coverage was minimal.

There were a total of 29 Election stories combined from the 3 stations during our study - 105 crime stories.

FOX17 had more stories on the ousting of Senator Jaye (9) than Election stories (6).

WZZM13 had only 2 more Election stories (9) than stories on the McVeigh execution (7).

Introduction

According to the Kent County Clerk's office turnout for Grand Rapids School Board Elections has been less than 10% and closer to 5% in recent years. The numbers this year don't seem to have improved much (8%), despite the fact that a great deal of controversy has surrounded the Grand Rapids Public Schools.

The decisions and proposals around school closings, budget cuts, special education and neighborhood schools has brought many citizens and parents to public forums to voice their concerns. In some areas parents and neighbors have even organized to prevent their school from closing.

This same controversy over schools is not just limited to Grand Rapids, however. Schools in Comstock Park, Kentwood, Holland, Kalamazoo and Muskegon have also been faced with similar issues. We know this in part, because the local media has given substantial coverage to the status of schools in the greater Grand Rapids and lakeshore areas. All 3 TV stations in the study have education reporters. During this 30-day study we documented a combined 73 education-related stories, demonstrating that the TV stations have made a commitment to covering children's education.

We saw this same commitment with GR School Board race on WOODTV8, but not from WZZM13 and FOX17. What we will present in this report are the differences in the amount of the 3 station's coverage, the type of coverage and some comparisons to other stories that received substantial coverage during the same 30-day period.

Following the same process as we have with other Election studies www.grcmc.org/reports, we will also draw some conclusions on whether or not viewers could make an informed vote. We will also make recommendations to the TV stations and encourage readers of this report to communicate with the news directors on our findings. As always our intent is to see the quality of journalism improve and to foster dialogue amongst the media and the public.

If anyone wishes to communicate with us here at GRIID you may call us at 459-4788 x122 or send us an e-mail at jsmith@grcmc.org.

Data Analysis

Probably more than any other election coverage study that we have conducted over the four years was there a clear winner in the amount of coverage between the three stations. As you can see from the data WOODTV8 not only had more election stories, they were the only TV-station that covered the candidates beyond name.

	8	13	17
Total # of Election Stories	14	9	6
GRSB Election stories	10	5	4
Muskegon Library Millage	3	3	1
EGR Bond Proposals	0	2	1
GRCC Board Election	0	0	0
Other Elections	2	0	0

Beginning on May 30th and running through June 8th, WOODTV8 did a profile of the eight candidates running for the Grand Rapids School Board (GRSB). The profiles gave viewers a chance to hear directly the platform and background of each candidate. Having said that there is still room for improvement on candidate coverage. WOODTV8 did not really ask the candidates any tough questions, at least none that

were aired. The candidate profiles were more of a summary of their positions. It would serve the public well to challenge any candidate with questions that could help viewers decide on where candidates stand. Also, viewers don't really need to know some of the "interesting" character attributes that they share with us. For instance, the profile of Karen Kelley spent about 30 seconds just talking about her appearance (her hair and ear-rings), and in David Bulkowski's profile we were told he was a bartender while in the seminary. Just stick to the issues.

On WZZM13 & FOX17 we never heard candidate voices nor a summary of their platforms. WZZM13 only listed candidate's names with their pictures and FOX17 just told us to go to their web page for more information. (The FOX17 web page did have candidate responses to three questions, but this assumes that viewers have easy access to the Internet.)

Only one candidate forum for the GRSB race was covered during the 30-day study (June 4th).

Here only WOODTV8 announced it ahead of time (June 3rd, 11pm), WZZM13 gave us no coverage, and FOX17 did a 16 second piece that never told us any of the candidate names, but informed us that one of their reporters moderated the forum.

Candidate Voices	Length of time		
<i>(GR School Board Race)</i>	8	13	17
LaDeidra Brown-Gais			:47
David Bulkowski			:38
Harold J. Hamilton			:49
Karen Marie Kelley			:52
Gayle N. Orange			:40
Luis R. Pena			:43
Patricia Pulliam			:35
Jeff Steinport			:50
Totals	6:54	0	0

The only other races to receive adequate coverage were the Muskegon Library Millage (WOODTV8 - 3 stories, WZZM13 - 3 stories & FOX17 - 1 story) and the East Grand Rapids Bond Proposals (WZZM13 - 2 stories & FOX17 - 1 story). Of the three stations WZZM13 devoted more time to the Muskegon Library Millage, but did not give us a sense of what the community felt about the issue. They only interviewed the Library director, a board member and one patron who had little to say about the vote.

For the East Grand Rapids Bond Proposals FOX17 gave us the best coverage. They included comments from both the Library and Parks & Recs director. WZZM13 did a piece with a family that lived on the East GR - GR boundary, but didn't really inform us on the two proposals and WOODTV8 did not cover the issue in the times we documented. None of the three station covered the Grand Rapids Community College Board race.

The only other races that received any coverage at all were on WOODTV8. They covered the Kalamazoo School Bond issue (June 9th -10th) and one candidate profile in a school board race in South Haven. Unfortunately the South Haven piece was mostly about the candidate's previous criminal record and not about his platform. More importantly was the fact that this profile was longer than any of the GRSB candidates (see data page). Does this mean that viewers are more interested in scandals surrounding a candidate than good analysis?

One last point should also be made about election coverage. By just looking at the County Clerk's web page you can see that over a dozen area school systems had school board elections. So why only Grand Rapids and the one piece on South Haven? It is true that Grand Rapids is probably the largest school system in the viewing area, but where can communities like Holland expect to get their news on local candidates. We realize that it may not be possible, nor desireable to cover all races in every city and township, but it is an issue that needs more consideration considering some of the questionable "new stories" that viewers are given on a daily basis.

Comparative Coverage

To honestly assess the level of commitment by the three stations to this election cycle we have to make comparisons to other stories that received substantial attention during the same 30-day period.

When criticism of media coverage arises we are often told that what we get on the news is what we want. During the 30-day study we documented a total of 29 election stories and 105 crime stories. That is a ratio of about 3.5 crime stories for every election story. Quite often during this 30-day period we found crime stories as the lead story, but only documented an election story as the lead story once (WZZM13 - June 7, 11pm).

The crime story that garnered the most attention during the study period was the Timothy McVeigh trial/execution. The combined total of this story received 23 stories, nearly the equivalent of all election stories - 29. The McVeigh trial/execution was not limited to the West Michigan viewing area, thus people could have received adequate coverage from any of the networks. When it comes to local elections it is rare that any network will provide coverage. It is with local elections that local TV-stations are key to informing the public.

Another issue that received substantial coverage was the ousting of Senator Jaye from the State Senate. Here the combined amount of stories was 26 stories, just 3 short of the combined total of election stories - 29. If politicians are committing crimes it is certainly news, but we have rarely seen this kind of coverage around legislation that impacts citizen quality of life with such frequency.

Lastly, it is worth noting the "buzz in the air" centered around actor Tom Hanks' presence in West Michigan shooting on location for a film. There was a combined 9 stories from the three station, with WZZM13 leading the way - 6 stories. The film production was only 3 stories short of the total WZZM13 election coverage, some of them providing substantial "investigation" as to where the filming was happening and plenty of comments from residents along the lakeshore.

What if the same amount of energy, resources and frequency that are put towards crime coverage were given to election coverage? What if entertainment pieces like the Tom Hanks presence were substituted for more election coverage? What if candidate forums were announced regularly and viewers were told that the next day an in depth story would be done about a particular race or proposal? If these basic journalistic tactics were applied it is quite likely that we would have an informed public. Based on our findings the public was hard pressed to make an informed vote. The only instance where this held true was WOODTV8's Grand Rapids School Board race and only in a limited capacity.

Data
Local Election Coverage
May 12-June 10, 2001

	<u>Date</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Length</u>
WOOD TV8			
<i>GRSB Candidate Steinport</i>	5-30	6pm	2:05
<i>GRSB Candidate Orange</i>	5-31	6pm	1:48
<i>GRSB Candidate Brown-Gais</i>	6-1	6pm	1:53
<i>Forum announcement</i>	6-3	11pm	:21
<i>GRSB Candidate Pulliam</i>	6-4	6pm	1:51
<i>South Haven election</i>	6-5	6pm	2:56
<i>GRSB Candidate Hamilton</i>	6-5	6pm	1:57
<i>GRSB Candidate Kelley</i>	6-6	6pm	2:07
<i>GRSB Candidate Pena</i>	6-7	6pm	1:42
<i>Muskegon Lib. Millage</i>	6-8	6pm	:45
<i>GRSB Candidate Bulkowski</i>	6-8	6pm	1:46
<i>Muskegon Lib. Millage</i>	6-8	11pm	:44
<i>Kalamazoo School Bond</i>	6-9	6pm	2:01
<i>Kazoo/GR/Muskegon vote</i>	6-10	6pm	<u>:23</u>

Total Time 21:29

WZZM 13

<i>GRSB race/EGR election</i>	6-7	11pm	3:18
<i>Muskegon Lib. Millage</i>	6-7	11pm	:21
<i>GRSB race</i>	6-8	6pm	:20
<i>GRSB race</i>	6-8	11pm	:15
<i>Muskegon Lib. Millage</i>	6-10	6pm	1:34
<i>GRSB race</i>	6-10	6pm	:30
<i>Muskegon Lib. Millage</i>	6-10	11pm	2:04
<i>GRSB race</i>	6-10	11pm	:23
<i>EGR proposals</i>	6-10	11pm	<u>:12</u>

Total Time 8:57

	Date	Time	Length
FOX 17			
<i>GRSB Candidate Forum</i>	6-4	10pm	:16
<i>Muskegon Lib. Millage</i>	6-5	10pm	1:51
<i>GRSB overview</i>	6-6	10pm	2:15
<i>GRSB race</i>	6-8	10pm	:23
<i>EGR Bond Proposals</i>	6-8	10pm	1:53
<i>GRSB race</i>	6-10	10pm	<u>:16</u>
Total Time			6:54



Total # of Election Stories	14	9	6
GRSB Election stories	10	5	4
Muskegon Library Millage	3	3	1
EGR Bond Proposals	0	2	1
GRCC Board Election	0	0	0
Other Elections	2	0	0
<i># of times election story was lead story</i>	0	1	0



Comparative Stories

Crime stories	37	34	34
Sen. Jaye's ousting	13	4	9
McVeigh trial/execution	10	7	6
Tom Hanks Film production	1	6	2

Candidate Voices

length of time

(GR School Board Race)

LaDeidra Brown-Gais	:47
David Bulkowski	:38
Harold J. Hamilton	:49
Karen Marie Kelley	:52
Gayle N. Orange	:40
Luis R. Pena	:43
Patricia Pulliam	:35
Jeff Steinport	:50

Totals	6:54	0	0
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(Other elections)

Candidate Voices	:24		
Citizen Voices	:52	:58	1:08

Recommendations

- 1) Make Local Election coverage a priority.
- 2) When covering candidates give substantial information on their positions, ask probing questions and give voting records of incumbents.
- 3) Inform viewers days in advance when public forums will be held or if they can be viewed in their entirety on other TV stations.
- 4) Give all candidates an equal amount of free air time.
- 5) During an election cycle make election stories lead stories as often as possible.
- 6) Give as much frequency to election stories as is given to crime stories.
- 7) Inform viewers - don't entertain them.

Who to Contact

**WOOD TV8
120 College SE
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503
456-8888
News Director: Jim Loy**

**WZZM 13
645 3 Mile Rd NW
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49544
785-1313
News Director: Cheryl Grant**

**WXMI 17
3117 Plaza Dr. NE
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49525
364-8722
News Director: Tim Dye**