

Sins of Omission

*Business and Labor Voices in Grand Rapids
TV News*

A Grand Rapids Institute for
Information Democracy Report.
(GRIID)

GRIID is an affiliate of the Community Media Center

Methodology

This report is the result of a six-month study of the daily news broadcasts of three Grand Rapids TV station: WOOD TV8 (6 & 11pm), WZZM 13 (6 & 11pm) and WXMI 17 (10pm). From September 1, 1999 through February 29, 2000, 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.

(Part of the data collecting was done by GVSU social work students. A word of thanks to them and Prof. Michel Coconis for their assistance on this research.)

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 participates in the consumption and creation of media and to promote democratic values with all media systems.

Introduction

'Tis the season to stroll down memory lane. With all hype about the beginning of the year 2000 many media pundits felt the need to wax nostalgically about the past 100 years. Peter Jennings hosted an ABC series called "The Century" that quickly evolved into a book suited for coffee tables. *Time* magazine chose it's "Man of the Century" and many US news outlets referred to the 20th Century as "The American Century."

Not to be outdone, much of the local media also had 20th Century retrospectives, a medley of the century's most memorable photos, and a slue of editorials on the history makers of the past 100 years. One television "special" I found most intriguing was a WZZM 13 show entitled "100 Years of West Michigan Memories."

Hosted by their feature newsreaders Lee and Juliet, the show was aired from the plush setting of the Voight House on College Ave. In many ways this was a dead give away as to the tone and content of this 30 minute "special" that aired a few weeks before the New Year.

Contained within this half-hour walk through memory lane were 12 feature pieces. One feature looked at a history of severe weather in West Michigan. The Flood of 1904 was the first weather story to be touched on by Grand Rapids historian Gordon Olsen. We also were given a glimpse of the 1956 tornado and the 1978 blizzard. A woman who survived the tornado recalled her experience and the blizzard was told through the eyes of a writer with the *Muskegon Chronicle*.

A few politicians were feature in the WZZM feature. Former GR Mayor George Welch's career received a lengthy review, as did the political career of the late Paul Henry. Of course, Gerald Ford was featured with affectionate comments from former Ambassador to Italy Peter Secchia.

A short piece was done on the history of urban renewal with the example of the battle over the old City Hall as the centerpiece. US astronaut Roger B. Chaffee was mentioned in passing and former president of the YWCA Helen Claitone was highlighted as Grand Rapids prominent Civil Rights activist. The remaining 8 features pieces took on notably one-sided view.

The bulk of the show was devoted to "those who really made West Michigan what it is today." In many ways the 100 years of memories was a photo album of West Michigan's aristocracy; the Blodgett family, Steelcase, Meijer, Kindel Furniture, DeVos and Van Andel. In one way or another it was just a bunch of rich White men sharing introspective pleasantries on life in West Michigan, with the exception of Paula Fogerty from Kindel Furniture.

For most residents in the WZZM viewing area this was a complete insult. Not once did we hear the voices of working people, the very people who literally built this community. Sure the furniture strike was mentioned, along with the Depression, but only in passing. Where were the voices of most residents of West Michigan who have contributed in ways too numerous to be mentioned here? Sadly, this omission of working people's voices was not just a shortcoming in this WZZM special, but standard fair in our daily newscasts.

....and now a word from our economist

From September 1, 1999 through February 29, 2000 GRIID conducted a daily survey of the local TV news from Channel 8 (6 & 11pm), Channel 13 (6 & 11pm) and WXMI's 10pm newscast. One of the things that we documented in this study of 2 1/2 hours of daily news, were economic-based stories; stories that have to do with development issues, general business & labor issues, and some consumer news.

Economic Stories on local TV News
(September 1 - February 29, 2000)

	Channel 8	Channel 13	Fox 17	Totals
Economic Stories	353	321	214	888
Business Voices	157	105	65	327
Labor Voices	27	24	21	72
Organized Labor Voices	4	2	0	6

As is indicated in the chart there were a great deal of economic-based stories in our six-month study, 888 total from the 3 stations. When you look at who had a voice in these stories you can see a big disparity between business and labor voices. In fact, there are about 4 1/2 as many business voices as labor voices, and these labor voices are mostly just talking about what they do. Organized labor voices are almost non-existent with a paltry six times that we heard union voices out of 888 economic-based stories.

Depending on whom you ask this disparity in voices may not bother most viewers, since most US citizens have embraced the "natural selection" of our current economic model. To think that Americans have always felt this way would be a tremendous disservice to history.

The US has always been a very class-conscious country and no one is more aware of this than the business community. Beginning during the Depression, but most aggressively after WWII, certain sectors in the business community, like the National Association of manufacturers, began massive educational programs to convince Americans that our Free Enterprise system was the best. All these efforts are well documented in Elizabeth Fones-Wolf's book *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor & Liberalism*. Fones-Wolf shows how resources were invested into films, school curriculum and programs like Junior Achievement to promote pro-business and anti-labor thinking.

Considering the effects that years of indoctrination have had on most of us it is no surprise that labor and union voices are in the minority. Labor people are only spoken to when there is a strike or other labor dispute issues. Why are labor organizers and even general laborers rarely asked about issues of employment trends or the global economy? Is it that they don't have an informed opinion? What are the long-term effects on the TV viewing public if a disproportionate number of opinions and voices are those from the business community when it comes to economic matters? These questions and more need to be raised in order to challenge the local TV news representations of economic issues. We encourage people to read the recommendations and to communicate with the news directors from the three TV stations. Without dialogue and accountability we can not expect change.

Suggested Resources:

- *By Invitation Only: How the Media Limit Political Debate*, Croteau & Hoynes, Common Courage Press, 1994
 - *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor*, Puette, ILR Press, 1992
 - *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor & Liberalism*, Fones-Wolf, Unn. of Illinois Press, 1994
- Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting - www.fair.org/system-bias/anti-laborbias.html

Recommendations

- when covering economic issues make sure that there is a balance of opinion.
- include various sectors of the population for opinions on economic issues; business associations, business owners, workers, labor organizers/ reps, government officials, academics, non-profits organizations, religious groups and citizens.
- provide more investigative stories on economic issues such as tax breaks, corporate subsidies, labor disputes, economic fraud, poverty, consumerism and local businesses in the global economy.
- create an economic roundtable from various sectors of the community to provide critique and input on news coverage of economic issues.
- cover soup kitchens, shelters, food pantries and other social welfare programs at times other than Thanksgiving and Christmas.
- provide more substantive data and information on economic trends; low unemployment numbers doesn't always equate with economic justice.
- treat non-profit and citizen advocacy groups that promote less consumption with the same enthusiasm and mall shopping and mall grand openings

Who to Contact

**WOOD TV 8
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: Sheryl Grant**

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