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## Air war in the Mile High City

### Denver watchdog group takes on local TV news

By Michael Grunwald  
GLOBE STAFF

DENVER - "Tonight, we begin with breaking news: Police officers in riot gear converge on an Aurora school!" The breathless KCNC-TV anchor announced it in a tone suggesting World War III.

The same story led KUSA-TV's news that night last February: "A high school basketball game ends in chaos!" Ditto for KMGH-TV: "This was a fight that got way out of hand!"

Only Denver's KWGN-TV strayed, however briefly, from the pack that night: "Tonight, a former Miss America recalls chilling similarities between her life and JonBenet Ramsey's. But first, this breaking news: a possible riot situation at Rangeview High School! Details remain sketchy..."

In the end, the riot fizzled; no one was badly hurt, although KCNC dutifully reported that someone had suffered "a bump on the head." But that night's newscasts, in the end, could have a major impact. A local news media watchdog group was taping them, and the tapes, with scores of similar broadcast snippets, have become prime evidence for the group's crusade to overhaul and reshape local TV



GLOBE PHOTO / ERIC BAKKE

**Paul Klite, a former doctor and radio journalist, founded Rocky Mountain Media Watch in 1994.**

news in Denver and across the nation.

Last month, Rocky Mountain Media Watch filed a first-of-its-kind petition with the Federal Communications Commission seeking to deny the relicensing of Denver's four commercial TV stations based on a scathing and detailed appraisal of news content.

The group says newscasts here are too violent and too sensational, ignoring key issues and hyping trivial ones in their quest for ratings and profits, and etching ugly stereotypes of minorities and of Den-

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ver-area life. This "imbalanced diet" of news, the group argues, is harmful to the public health.

"Night after night, the local news is an onslaught of trash journalism," said Paul Klite, 59, a former doctor and radio journalist who founded Rocky Mountain Media Watch in 1994. "Instead of informing people, it just scares and polarizes and titillates them. That has a toxic effect on the community."

In fact, Denver's local news coverage is considered substantive by national standards, and its two top rated news stations have won prestigious national awards. And for all the intellectual complaints about blood-and-guts journalism, about the emphasis on stickups and molesters instead of education and AIDS, local TV news in cities across the country was rated favorably by 81 percent of those polled by the Pew Research Center in 1997, the highest marks for any news medium.

Still, the rare FCC challenge has stirred serious self-examination among the four Denver stations. "This does make us stop and take another look," said Roger Ogder, general manager of KUSA.

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*'Night after night, the local news is an onslaught of trash journalism. Instead of informing people, it just scares and polarizes and titillates them.'*

PAUL KLITE, Rocky Mountain Media Watch

# Watchdog group crusades to overhaul TV news

The issues raised by the challenge also are the subject of debates raging within the broadcast industry. Some stations are starting to question whether the if-it-bleeds-it-leads mentality makes sense in an era of plunging crime rates, whether financial motives are overshadowing journalistic ethics, whether audiences really need to see video of every fiery explosion and car chase.

TV is still the best medium for visually arresting images and you-are-there drama, but some broadcasters worry that its immediacy has crowded out its intelligence.

"There's a great deal of self-criticism going on in this industry right now," said Barbara Cochran, president of the Radio-TV News Directors Association. "It's still an incredibly competitive business, but people are definitely saying there needs to be more than just body-bag stories."

The FCC has not denied a license renewal since the mid-'70s, well before the deregulation of the broadcast industry, so no one expects that to happen here.

Rocky Mountain Media Watch did propose conditions the stations could be forced to meet to keep their licenses, including mandatory public service announcements to warn viewers about imbalanced news coverage and a mandatory expansion of local election coverage. But even Klite would be surprised if the FCC agreed to dictate changes in the content of local newscasts.

Still, the Media Watch petition has caused a stir in Denver, and Klite hopes it will inspire similar challenges around a country where as many as 80 million people tune in to local news.

In its survey of 100 local newscasts on that February night last year, the group found that 33 percent of all stories were devoted to crime, while 2 percent or less were devoted to topics such as poverty, the environment, and religion. The same formulas showed up all over the country: smooth-skinned anchors behind shiny desks, palpitating music behind blood-red graphics, weather guys who mug for the cameras and sports guys who promise to tell who won ... right after these messages.

"Almost everyone is using the same mindless script," said Klite, a '60s activist who runs the Media Watch out of his Capitol Hill apartment. "It's not just a Denver problem. It's a national problem."

Media Watch filed its complaint in Denver because it is based in Denver, but violent TV news is less of a Denver phenomenon than a national

## Watching the news

Rocky Mountain Media Watch analyzed 100 local TV newscasts from 55 markets across the nation on Feb. 26, 1997. The average show included about 13 minutes of news, not including time spent on ads, sports, weather, promos, or "anchor chitchat." This is how the stations filled their air time:

### Percentage of broadcast dedicated to ...

Crime	33.0	Soft news	4.3	Science	1.9
Media	9.7	Human interest	2.3	Civil rights	1.7
Economy/business	8.8	Elections	2.2	Education	1.7
Health	8.3	Environment	2.1	War and terrorism	1.5
Government	7.7	Public works	2.0	Children	1.4
Disasters	7.1	Arts and humanities	2.0	All others	2.2

### Racial composition of people on local TV news

	WHITE	BLACK	HISP.	OTHER
Anchor	88%	8%	6%	0%
Reporter	83%	9%	9%	2%
Source	80%	14%	5%	0%
Victim	78%	9%	7%	2%
Perpetrator	32%	44%	14%	0%
1995 Colorado population	80%	6%	13%	2%

Due to rounding, some categories do not add to 100%.

### These were some of the less consequential items on TV news that night:

Attack of the giant tumbleweeds	Pregnant turtle gets sonogram
Dennis Rodman poses in a bikini	The science of tickling
Kevin Costner rated sexiest man in France	Police adopt Scrappy the dog
Hypnosis for horses	Talking parrot claims up on camera
Iguanas are vegetarians	Big Foot convention
Fergie moves to servant's quarters	

SOURCES: Rocky Mountain Media Watch, Colorado Division of Local Government

GLOBE STAFF CHART

one.

The best-known practitioner of this fast-paced, shoot-'em-up, entertainment-first style is WSVN in Miami, owned by the same company that owns WHDH (Channel 7) in Boston. Crime-and-grime is also the norm in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

In Denver, KMGH adopted a similar format under a former WSVN news director hired last year, featuring an anchorwoman who walked around the set in miniskirts. But its ratings plunged even lower, down to a 10 percent share for its late news, and the news director left town last week.

"We were leading with these rapid-fire video clips that meant absolutely nothing to Colorado," said Norman Van Ness, an assignment editor who left KMGH for its rival KUSA. "Boom! Ten seconds on a mudslide in LA. Bam! Ten seconds on a bank robbery in New York. Cool pictures, but it wasn't news."

By contrast, KUSA, Denver's top-rated late news, and KCNC, the

top-rated early news, are recipients of the Edward R. Murrow Award for the nation's best news station.

This phenomenon is even starker in Austin, Texas, where KVUE has held the top spot in the ratings while adopting specific guidelines to reduce its coverage of crime and fluff. However, in Orlando, Fla., a similar effort to beef up substantive reporting has dropped WESH into last place.

"We discuss this stuff all the time, and we don't always get it right," said KUSA's news director, Patti Dennis, a dynamic woman who played with a Slinky while she talked. "There are times when I watch our news and think: Am I the only person in Denver who didn't die today? But it's tough. This is a business, you know. We have to think about our audience, and the bottom line."

In the 1960s, the FCC had to pressure many stations to offer local news, but the stations soon discovered that the shows could be a bonanza. Today, KUSA offers more

than 30 hours of local news a week, and its 10 o'clock newscast is the highest-rated in the country.

But the huge corporations that snapped up local stations in the wake of deregulation are slow to plow profits back into news operations. At KUSA, owned by Gannett, the news staff has only 17 reporters, leaving them little time to develop areas of expertise or cover in-depth stories. (In contrast, CBS's "60 Minutes" employs 100 reporters for one hour of television time a week.) The small KUSA staff spends most of its time responding to reports on the station's 15 police and fire scanners.

A reporter was invited to watch KUSA's news operation one day last week, by all accounts a slow news day on the scanners. "Sorry, no mayhem for you today," joked Ted Fine, producer of the 6 o'clock news.

At the daily news meeting, the producers, joined by Adele Arakawa, a longtime anchorwoman who defies the bubble-head stereotype, focused on stories about statehood for Puerto Rico and higher insurance rates for sport utility vehicles. Still, when 6 o'clock rolled around, the top three stories were about crimes. "That's the nature of the TV beast," said executive producer Graham Clarke.

While Klite argues that local news harms communities with bad journalism, many local stations serve their communities in ways that have little to do with journalism.

On the day of the reporter's visit to the KUSA newsroom, a team of lawyers was dispensing free legal advice to viewers who called in to the station. Asked to name three of the station's recent accomplishments, general manager Roger Ogden cited a Channel 9 health fair that served 40,000 people, a 9 Who Care program to honor volunteers, and a public service campaign against teenage smoking. He did not mention a single on-air story.

To be sure, critics like Klite clearly are making an impression on local news operations. If nothing else, there is at least a new emphasis on self-examination. In the end, though, every station will have to answer to the same masters: the viewers holding the remote controls.

"We think that people deserve a lot better," Klite said. "But if the people themselves don't think so, we're going to have a difficult battle."

# FCC rejects Denver license challenge

*Says violence on local news is not basis for intervention; broadcasters cheer decision*

By Chris McConnell

The FCC last week rejected a Denver group's contention that the government should pull four TV licenses because the stations aired too much violence in their local news coverage.

Rocky Mountain Media Watch in February had asked regulators to deny license renewals to Denver's KCNC-TV, KMGH-TV, KUSA-TV and KWGN-TV after the group conducted a study of the local newscasts at the stations. The group told the commission that the newscasts suffer from "toxic TV news syndrome" and that stories about crime, disasters, war and terrorism accounted for up to 55% of each newscast.

The group also said that the newscasts underrepresented women and minorities as authority figures and devoted a higher-than-average portion



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of their evening newscasts to commercials.

Regulators found the group's analysis irrelevant to a license renewal application.

"Although we believe that Media Watch's views regarding violence in news programming are legitimate matters for discussion within the Denver community, the alleged predominance of violence in the stations' local evening news does not present a basis for inter-

vention by the commission in connection with a license renewal application," video services division chief Barbara Kreisman wrote in the FCC's decision.

Kreisman also cited First Amendment protection and journalistic discretion afforded broadcasters.

"Editorial judgments regarding news programs are committed to a broadcaster's good faith discretion," Kreisman wrote. "With certain limited exceptions not applicable here, licensees

are afforded broad discretion in the scheduling, selection and presentation of programs aired on their stations."

The commission also found no merit in the group's complaints about minority representation and overcommercialization at the stations.

The decision came as no surprise to broadcasters, but won cheers nonetheless.

"The FCC's decision supports definitively the editorial freedom of broadcast journalists," Radio-Television News Directors Association President Barbara Cochran said of the action.

"We congratulate the FCC for defending the right of stations to exercise editorial judgment in local news coverage," added NAB President Eddie Fritts.

Washington communications lawyer R. Clark Wadlow called the group's petition "pretty silly," but added that he was impressed with the commission's swift decision to reject it.

Paul Klite, Rocky Mountain Media Watch executive director, said he was disappointed with the ruling but voiced hopes that groups in other cities will file similar petitions with the FCC. ■

## Satellite rewrite stalled by must-carry debate

*Broadcasters, DBS spar over requirements for local-into-local*

By Paige Albinak

Any chance for a rewrite of the satellite law this year could be killed by broadcasters' demand that satellite TV providers carry all local broadcast signals in markets they serve.

House Telecommunications Subcommittee Chairman Billy Tauzin (R-La.), an ally both of the direct broadcast satellite industry and of broadcasters, says he plans in the next two months to introduce legislation that would clearly allow DBS providers to legally offer local signals. But Tauzin is running out of time.

"It makes it more difficult ... but that doesn't mean we aren't going to offer [a bill]," Tauzin says. "We need to debate it. We still need to try and do it. But I can't be as optimistic as I would be if the broadcasters would come around to some agreement on it."

That appears unlikely. And sources

say broadcasters dislike a bill being floated by Senate Commerce Committee Chairman John McCain (R-Ariz.) that would give DBS companies at least a year before the FCC writes a rule setting must-carry requirements.

McCain's proposal, one observer notes, "offers something for everyone to hate." But Andy Paul, vice president of the Satellite Broadcasting and Communications Association, says McCain "is on the right track."

Congress faces a dilemma because non-basic cable tiers are due to be deregulated next March. Rather than reregulate, lawmakers would prefer to let market pressure set prices. But two years after the 1996 Telecommunications Act, only DBS is prepared to compete with cable.

Nonetheless, key lawmakers are not approaching this issue with great urgency.

EchoStar, the only operating DBS company pressing for legislation that would allow it to offer local signals, says it prefers no legislation this year to bills from House Courts and Intellectual Property Subcommittee Chairman Howard Coble (R-N.C.) or Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-Utah). Both bills would require DBS companies to offer all local signals in all local markets they choose to serve as soon as they enter that market.

A new version of Hatch's bill, which started off by mirroring Coble's, would give satellite TV providers a permanent copyright license for local broadcast signals. But it only extends the satellites' license for imported signals for three years. It also would do nothing to change increases in copyright rates implemented by the U.S. Copyright Office earlier this year. ■