

Good night, and good luck: Does TV news still matter?

By Karen Friedman

As a former TV news reporter and anchor, I often wonder whether TV news still matters. My first thought is usually, “Of course it does.” However, perhaps a better question in this age of social media is, “Does TV news matter as much as it once did?”

Research suggests that it does not. According to data from Nielsen, viewership of the three evening network news programs has steadily declined over the past 25 years, falling by more than 1 million viewers each year — translating into millions of dollars in lost annual revenue. The 2009 Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism’s State of the News Media annual report says that local news staffs, already too small to adequately cover their communities, are being cut at unprecedented rates. As a result, this caused local revenues to fall by a surprising 7 percent in a single election year — and ratings continue to drop. Only cable news is flourishing.

As previous Pew annual reports have shown, social media is rapidly becoming mainstream media. Pew cited one survey stating that the number of Americans who say that they found “most of their national and international news” online increased 67 percent in the past four years.

While the growth in online news consumption cuts across all age groups, the younger generation is leading the change in media habits. It appears that the limitations of three main channels and a dinner-hour time slot are to blame. Even an unofficial survey that I conducted with some of my son’s college-bound friends revealed that if they want news, they’d rather obtain it online, without commercials and with the ability to move on to something else when they lose interest.

Making adjustments

Rick Williams, executive producer at WPVI-ABC TV in Philadelphia, agrees. Williams says that because younger viewers find most of their information on the Internet, it is critical to cross-promote news between the TV and Web platforms.

For example, stations are now streaming news events live and carrying breaking stories on their Web sites. Viewers no longer have to wait until the evening news programs. To do this, many stations have hired producers who only create Web content, update stories online, produce video for Web sites and generate breaking-news alerts that are sent to sub-



Is the evening news as relevant as it was in previous generations?

scribers’ cell phones and e-mail.

As a result, Williams says that WPVI is probably in better shape than most stations because it has focused attention on viewer habits, and also maintained a loyal audience who has followed the same anchor for more than 30 years.

“Our ratings are still strong, but clearly not as strong as [they once were],” says Williams. “Overall TV viewing is down, especially given you can now watch what you want to watch when you want to watch it.”

He says that many stations “have all but turned out the lights in their newsrooms and have laid off [many] people” because they can now share video and use more features from other content providers.

However, he stresses that TV news, especially local news, is still relevant for many stations around the country, especially with weather reporting. Williams says that even though you go to many Web sites for a quick update, local weather reports remain big drivers for TV news viewers. Additionally, as lifestyles change and people start their days earlier, morning news programs are growing as well.

Meanwhile, TV stations are now having the same experience as newspaper newsrooms: Award-winning journalists and broadcast executives are leaving TV stations to begin alternative news sites. These sites provide investigative reporting, hiring freelance journalists for content and offer long, in-depth pieces that are tough to find in today’s revenue-challenged TV newsrooms.

Media and political consultant Larry Ceisler says that the financial pressure on local news is forcing those operations to air more voiceovers and use fewer reporters.

“The fact that reporters are younger and less experienced in their markets is a detriment,” Ceisler says. Because money is tight, many newsrooms can’t afford to

hire experienced reporters and producers who are familiar with the market where they work.

Ceisler adds that the quality of reporting has diminished and believes scoring coverage on TV news programs is not as important as it once was for PR professionals.

“It is always good for the client, when they have an event, to see cameras,” he says, “but cameras are becoming more like props for clients.

Bottom line, TV news just does not have the impact it once did.”

While this may be true, other PR professionals believe that TV is a convenient and effortless way to stay on top of what’s happening in the world, especially for older people who are not as computer savvy as other generations.

“When you consider that more people [use] TVs than computers to access news online, [then] the role and continued value of TV news becomes more apparent,” says Lori Neuman, communications manager for NRG Energy. She adds that TV news reaches all audiences — it’s still an important vehicle to get your message out.

Media and crisis consultant Rick Amme believes that TV news is more relevant now than ever before because of YouTube.

“TV news has now become potential source material for good or bad news and the viral videos can have a more powerful, visceral impact on many different audiences,” says Amme, a former TV reporter.

Still tuning in

I believe that TV news, especially local news, will remain relevant to people who want to know what’s happening in their communities. Despite the steady decline of viewers, Pew reports that approximately two-thirds of Americans say that they still get their news from their local TV stations.

Although newsrooms across the country are cutting salaries and staff and merging operations to pare down costs, many continue adding extra newscasts in an effort to remain profitable — as news programming can account for nearly half of a station’s overall revenue.

TV news must strive to remain relevant by continuing to increase Web presence and attract younger viewers. But I

Facing digital competition, network TV struggles to adapt

Even as the major networks still command more than 60 percent of TV advertising dollars and attract the biggest audiences, broadcast revenues are down an estimated 9 percent this year. *BusinessWeek* reported in late April. Competition is everywhere — from the cable channels that are making some of today’s most popular shows and targeting niche audiences, to Internet entertainment like YouTube and online games, and pirated movies and TV shows on DVD.

Such forces are reaching an inflection point, according to the magazine. “The business model has to change, and I think every network executive knows that,” said BBC Worldwide Americas President Garth Ancier.

The era of shows with broad appeal is over, as networks scramble to adapt to a fragmented landscape. Five years from now, network television will look very different, industry insiders say — the 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. prime-time slot will probably be shorter and possibly handed back to local affiliates, and programs will be tailored to specific audiences. Since programming costs are increasing at a time when audiences are shrinking, TV networks will be forced to share the costs of producing new shows with other marketers and foreign networks. Watching TV will likely become similar to using the Web — one product being tested, called MediaFriends TV Chat, would let viewers send text messages to their friends’ TV screens if they’re watching the same show. The goal is to keep viewers watching instead of surfing channels or heading to the Web. **T**

—Greg Beaubien

also believe that TV news must consistently differentiate itself from other mediums by doing what it does best: broadcasting world events and live breaking news in a way that only TV cameras can capture. **T**



Karen Friedman is a former TV news reporter and anchor. She is president of Karen Friedman Enterprises. E-mail: Karen@karenfriedman.com.