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Nightcrawler Nation



By Marty Kaplan



OPEN ROAD

When I heard my research into the amount of time local TV news spends on crime (plenty) and government (nearly *nada*) coming out of Jake Gyllenhaal's mouth, I could have kissed him. If he'd added that those same civically negligent, inflammatory stations also make billions of dollars off of political ads, I think I would have asked him and Dan Gilroy, the writer-director of their new movie, *Nightcrawler*, to marry me.

To be adequately horrified by the midterm campaign we've just endured, all you need to pay attention to is attention itself, and how attention is monetized.

We live in an information age. Every two days, says Google CEO Eric Schmidt, we now create as much new information as we have since the dawn of our species. But "a wealth of information," as Nobel Prize-winning economist Herb Simon pointed out, "creates a poverty of attention." We can't increase the total attention we can pay; despite talk of multi-tasking, attention is a finite resource, a zero sum game. We have limited bandwidth. Sometimes we consciously choose what we want to pay attention to, using the top-down part of our brain. But our attention can be hijacked. The bottom-up part of our brain, which evolved in our primitive past, is wired to pay attention to danger. It's immediate, instinctive, faster than reason; if fear had depended on thinking, we'd have been eaten.

Television stations are in the business of selling audiences to advertisers. The more people whose attention their programming can grab, the more money they can charge advertisers for 30-second spots. So it makes sense that station owners looking for ratings would air hours of programming dominated by murder, robbery, assault, kidnapping, gruesome accidents — anything that will reliably scare viewers into watching.

That's what the research I did with Seton Hall professor Matt Hale has found. We've been studying the content of local TV news around the country since 1998. In 2009, we did an intensive study of a single TV market, Los Angeles. We analyzed more than 11,000 stories aired by eight stations during nearly 1,000 half-hours of news over 14 days. Here's some of what we found:

- A typical half hour of L.A. news contained 2 minutes 50 seconds of crime news. That's more than any other category of news except sports and weather.
- The average time spent on L.A. government news — including budgets, layoffs, education, law enforcement, prisons, lawsuits, ordinances, personnel, voting procedures, health care, transportation and immigration — was 22 seconds.
- One station — KCOP — ran an average of 5 minutes 3 seconds of crime per half hour, and one second of L.A. government news.
- Stories about local government led the news two-and-a-half percent of the time. But stories about crime led more than 13 times that: one out of three broadcasts began with crime. If it bleeds, it leads.

That's the research cited in the movie by Jake Gyllenhaal's lowlife character, Lou Bloom, a nightcrawler — the term for a freelance cameraman who monitors a police scanner, races to gory sites and sells the footage, in this case, to "KWLA," the market's lowest-rated station, whose news director, played by Rene Russo, is an avid buyer. "A screaming woman running down the street with her throat cut," she says, is the ideal story. Especially if it happens in a good neighborhood: "A carjacking in Compton is not news."

You would think that TV stations have a public-interest obligation to cover government, public affairs, important issues — stories citizens need to know. After all, stations owners pay nothing for the licenses the public gives them to broadcast over the airwaves the public owns. But if you believe that, you'd be wrong. Decades of deregulation mean that stations now have no obligation to meet the critical information needs of their communities. They can cover, or not, whatever they want. Crime in fact is declining, but there's no legal requirement for news to reflect reality, and apparently there's no moral requirement to limit the toxins they dump into our common culture.

So stations use violence to capture our attention, to amp up their ratings and to raise the rates they charge advertisers to rent our eyeballs. And who are those advertisers? This year, overwhelmingly, they are political candidates, political parties, political action committees, special interests, tax-exempt "social welfare" organizations, billionaires, corporations and the undisclosed, untraceable contributors of many hundreds of millions of dollars of political "dark money."

The total cost of the 2014 elections is expected to reach almost \$4 billion. Most of it has been spent on political advertising; most of that goes to local TV stations; most of that is dark money; most of it pays for negative ads; most of those ads air on local TV news and most local news programs provide scant coverage of the honesty of those ads or the substance of those campaigns.

The specifics are galling. From studies of an Internet Archive data base of local TV news, we now know that there have been half hours in Philadelphia airing 11 or more political ads, providing those stations with more than half a million dollars of ad revenue, but those same 30 minutes have included zero minutes of actual reporting on those campaigns. Demand for air time for political ads during the news led station WHO in Des Moines to add an extra 4 p.m. hour of local news to cash in. A *Los Angeles Times* story reported that, according to the general manager of WTOG in Savannah, Ga., the rates they charged for political ads on the Georgia versus Florida football game "are akin to what we charge for the Super Bowl." An executive at a Republican media buying firm told the paper that some ads were going for 10 times the normal rate; "one Denver station was selling a 30-second spot during a Broncos game at \$125,000."

I know firsthand that there are exceptions to the blackout of civic news: Since 2000, I've run the competition for the biennial Walter Cronkite Award for excellence in TV coverage of politics, and the winners, from markets small and large across the country, do heroic work against long odds, and their stations' ratings haven't suffered because of it. I wish they were the rule, not the exception. I wish that getting money out of politics were a hot button issue, instead of polling at the bottom of voters'

priorities. I wish media reform proposals, like free air time for candidates, weren't dead on arrival at the Federal Communications Commission or in Congress, thanks to the millions that the National Association of Broadcasters and their corporate allies spread around Capitol Hill.

I also wish that the focus *Nightcrawler* puts on the news industry's financial incentive to inject terror into our civic bloodstream could inspire an antidote to the venom that negative campaign ads pump into our democracy. But I'm a realist. I once wrote a comedy about — improbably — campaign finance reform, *The Distinguished Gentleman*, which Eddie Murphy starred in and Disney released. I fantasized that that movie could make a difference, too. But today's political corruption makes the legal con job that congressmen and lobbyists pulled on America a generation ago seem quaint. On the other hand, if Jake Gyllenhaal ever wants to run for office on a reform platform, I'll be first in line to volunteer as a speechwriter.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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